鑑定士上今日子の札束

西尾維新

NISIOISIN

Illustration / VOFAN

100%趣味で忘れた小説です

西尾維新

私は彼女を知っている
忘却探偵になる以前からね

推理力を奪われた
今日子さんのため、
相棒（バディ）・厄介（やくすけ）が奔走！

シリーズ最大の敵にどう挑む？
タイムリミットミステリー！

講談社

掟上今日子の秘密が明かされる、必読のエピソード解禁!

掟上今日子の鑑札票

西尾維新
NISIOISIN

Kodansha

第一話　掟上今日子の狙撃手
第二話　掟上今日子の地雷原
第三話　掟上今日子の自走砲
第四話　掟上今日子の防空壕
第五話　掟上今日子の徴兵制
最終話　掟上今日子の終戦日

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第一話　掟上今日子の狙撃手

Ch 1: Kyoko Okitegami’s Sniper

1

"A detective who has her memory reset every day, absolutely adhering to confidentiality? So, she solves every case within a day because of that, making her the fastest detective? Honestly, how could anyone come up with such an absurd and ridiculous setting? It's completely unbelievable. If you think I would fall for such a bluff, then you've really underestimated me."

The one who showed an extremely common reaction to the unique existence of the "Forgetful Detective" was, however, neither among the gathered people nor the audience, nor related parties, witnesses, or even suspects. This was a common, standard introduction in "her" case files, but even for a regular customer like me, Yakusuke Kakushidate, it was a first-time reaction.

The reason being—

"Honestly, drawing some incomprehensible doodles on someone's arm while they're asleep—what a ridiculous story. This is the very definition of absurdity. 'I'm Kyoko Okitegami, detective'? There's no way I'd believe that, even though this handwriting does resemble mine. This looks like something written while completely drunk, making no sense at all."

Yes—the speaker was none other than the Forgetful Detective herself.

It was Kyoko Okitegami, the Forgetful Detective, speaking—a fashionable detective with white hair and eyeglasses. However, the outfit she was currently wearing was a practical hospital gown, her glasses were off, and her head was white not because of her natural white hair, but because it was wrapped in bandages.

And she was lying in a hospital bed.

"N—No, please get a hold of yourself, Ms. Kyoko. If you're not that detective, then who is? Come on, don't you remember? For example, the data theft case at the Sarashina Research Institute—the terrifyingly impossible crime?"

"Huh? 'Impossible crime'? What's that?"

It was a somewhat mismatched question to ask if she remembered when addressing the Forgetful Detective, but she gave me a thoroughly puzzled look. It was as if her usual pleasant, business-like demeanor had completely vanished. Where did that cheerful smile go?

No, this mismatched conversation was also, in a way, the usual mildly amusing exchange with the Forgetful Detective, but this time it was fundamentally different—what she had forgotten wasn't the theft case itself.

Ms. Kyoko had forgotten the meaning of "impossible crime."

The meaning of it.

"A—An impossible crime is just that, an impossible crime. Like the 'Many-Body Problem Case,' which was the very first case I asked you to solve—"

"'Case'? 'Solve'?"

See?

She doesn't even understand "solve" anymore—or perhaps even "case." This is a reaction unbecoming of a detective. It's like she's hearing a foreign language.

"Y-You must remember the big showdown with the master thief, Count Kakushaku, or the battle with the bomber 'QRETA 9010', even if your mind has forgotten, your body should remember!"

"'Master thief'? 'Bomber'?"

Of course, it's only natural that the Forgetful Detective, whose memory resets every day, would forget about these villains, just as she forgets about me, her regular customer—but that's not all. Ms. Kyoko doesn't understand "master thief" or "bomber" anymore.

Yes. This isn't the usual memory loss.

She's lost her semantic memory—not episodic memory, but the memory of meanings.

Specifically, the semantic memory for mystery-related terms.

...But that can't be. That shouldn't happen. The one thing that could be called Ms. Kyoko's only identity, "Detective," has been completely and utterly lost—

"P-Please try to remember. That locked-room incident from the 'Musical Score' case, or the poisoning in the ‘Bulletin Board' case—"

"'Locked-room'? 'Poisoning'? I have no idea what you're talking about."

When she says she has no idea what I'm talking about, it makes me feel like none of these cases ever happened. Maybe 'Musical Score' and 'Bulletin Board' are just figments of my imagination... but still.

"B-But, the Forgetful Detective's spectacular achievements were even turned into a mystery drama, you know?"

"Is this a dream?"

Now that she mentions it, maybe that was just a dream... But when she gives me such a clueless response, it feels like the very concept of "mystery," no, the entire culture of "detective novels," is being denied.

It's like a denial of entertainment itself.

"Honestly, you're saying some strange things. Isn't a detective's job to find lost pets or investigate cheating?"

The fact that Ms. Kyoko would say something so ordinary, with not a shred of affection for detective novels... How on earth did it come to this?

It all started yesterday, a day I wouldn't forget—

2

"P—Please let me call a detective!"

My introduction was as ordinary as ever. This was Yakusuke Kakushidate, and in a way, it was just another case of the usual false accusation I'm accustomed to—though there was a slightly unusual aspect this time.

There was a noteworthy detail.

Normally, being treated as a suspect is, of course, not a pleasant experience—whether it’s a misdemeanor or a felony, no false accusation is ever an honor. However, if I had to cite an exception, this might be it.

Because, you see, I was a sniper.

Can you believe it? I was suspected of being a sniper—damn, that’s kind of cool, even if it’s wildly different from the unimpressive reality of who I am.

Here’s the gist of it.

Since the Forgetful Detective is in this condition, I have to be extra careful about leaking personal information, so let’s say the victim was a high-ranking executive of a certain large corporation. This person was hospitalized in a private room at a general hospital. They were there to undergo surgery for a serious illness, but fortunately, the operation itself was a success—however, it seemed that someone was not happy about that.

That someone shot the executive, who was recovering well and just waiting for discharge, from a great distance, through the window—three bullet holes in the window of their hospital room (of course, it was a private VIP room).

And three holes in the executive's body as well.

It's undeniable that the assassin hired by someone who didn't wish for the executive's recovery was a highly skilled sniper. I know talking like this makes it sound unrealistic, but it was probably a "hitman"... which sounds even more far-fetched than a "detective."

However, despite being riddled with bullet holes, the executive managed to survive, proving just how formidable they were. Though in a coma and in critical condition, they're currently in intensive care, still in a precarious situation... The attending physician, who had originally been closely monitoring their condition, probably never imagined they'd have to perform another surgery like this.

A sniper. A sharpshooter.

It's quite a romantic notion... Though reflecting on it, it's probably these carefree thoughts why I ended up being falsely accused—I was working on the upper floors of a distant construction site, a new job I'd found with great difficulty that had absolutely no connection to the hospital in question or the large corporation where the executive worked. Before I knew it, I was apprehended by the police who had rushed to the scene.

Apparently, the room I was working in at a high-rise construction site far from the hospital was the perfect and only possible point from which to shoot the executive's private room—unfortunately, due to staff shortages at every worksite (which is probably why they'd hire someone as suspicious as me), I was working alone.

Since they suspected me of being the sniper, the police who rushed in were practically a SWAT team—so, as usual, once again...

"P—Please let me call a detective!"

I pleaded.

3

After that, a peaceful time continued, as usual—of course, we were in the middle of an attempted murder, with the victim still hovering between life and death, and I remained the prime suspect, so things were far from being resolved peacefully. But still, this was just another day in the life of me, the False Accusations King.

Needless to say, the detective I called was Ms. Kyoko. If the enemy is a long-range sniper, who else could I call but the fastest detective? Her deductions are quicker than a bullet, faster than the culprit can escape.

I had thought so.

It could even be said that my mistaken belief that the real culprit had fled was a fatal error—but of course, I had no awareness of that while in the midst of it.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, detective."

No sooner had she given her usual greeting than the white-haired detective promptly headed to the VIP private room to conduct an on-site investigation—I ended up accompanying her, bound with a rope around my waist.

The reason it wasn't handcuffs was that, although I had been apprehended and was the prime suspect as the large man found at the sniper's vantage point, I was not in possession of the murder weapon, a sniper rifle, nor was there any other evidence (naturally!), so I hadn't been arrested—I was merely a person of interest, being questioned voluntarily.

Even though it was strange to be tied up with a rope as a person of interest, I won't make a fuss about it.

However, these were about the only times I was treated as an important person. I was nothing compared to the victim, a company executive.

"Hmm, hmm. So the victim was shot in this hospital room—ah, I see, these are the bullet holes in the window."

Without paying any attention to her client, who was tied up with a rope, Ms. Kyoko swiftly and efficiently proceeded with the investigation—she was completely unfazed by the three bullet holes. I, on the other hand, was utterly terrified by not only the bullet holes but also the bloodstains scattered on the bed and floor...

I couldn't even bring myself to enter the hospital room—not that I would have been allowed in past the door anyway, due to the risk of evidence tampering.

I couldn't even cross the threshold of the crime scene.

Far from being intimidated, Ms. Kyoko used the bullet holes as if they were binoculars and peered outside the hospital—the outside being my work site, or rather, since I was fired the moment I was apprehended (on paper, I was let go the previous day—what a way to protect the organization), it was the building under construction at my "former" work site. Or was it being demolished? Well, it's one or the other.

"Indeed, in this forest of skyscrapers, where buildings sprout up like bamboo shoots after the rain, the lines of fire for sniping are limited—this cityscape is like a bamboo grove. But for someone to hit the target from that position with three shots, that must be one heck of a skilled sniper, Mr. Kakushidate."

"Well, not really—"

No, no, no. It wasn't me.

This detective tried to trip me up and get a confession out of me. It's understandable that she, meeting me for the first time, would be suspicious, but what a way to treat a regular customer. She suspected the pattern where the client equals the culprit first and foremost.

"B-But, it's not necessarily true that the sniper was that skilled, is it? After all, even though the shots hit, the victim is still alive."

I made this feeble attempt at an excuse (?), suggesting that maybe hitting the target but not killing them was actually a sign of incompetence, but Ms. Kyoko wouldn't let up, responding, "Oh my, you speak as if it's inconvenient that the victim is still alive," in a teasing tone, though her eyes were serious.

Her suspicion was too deep. It was merciless.

"By the way, what illness was that executive hospitalized for?"

"Lung cancer. The patient was what you'd call a heavy smoker."

The nurse, who was present, casually divulged the victim's privacy, likely because Ms. Kyoko is the Forgetful Detective—after all, all information related to the case would be reset in a day. Incidentally, I had already been informed of the victim's medical history during my interrogation.

"So the cancer was advanced enough to require surgery. However, for a smoker, this room doesn't really smell of tobacco, does it?"

"Of course not, smoking is prohibited. That's how it is everywhere these days."

Due to the side effect of having her memory reset every day, Ms. Kyoko's knowledge doesn't get updated beyond a certain point—though, considering the patient was hospitalized for a severe illness, smoking wouldn't have been allowed regardless.

But what does that even mean? Is she about to suggest something stylish, like the sniper used the cigarette's flame as a target?

"Yes, that’s exactly right."

"Huh?"

I had assumed she was being witty, but Ms. Kyoko removed her gaze from the bullet holes and twirled around lightly on the spot, turning to face us.

"The sniper most likely targeted the victim while they were smoking—perhaps the shooter was a staunch anti-smoking advocate."

"N-No way, Ms. Kyoko... Are you saying you’ve already figured out who the culprit is?"

"Yes. I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

That’s ridiculous, even for her. If that’s the case, she’s not just the fastest detective, she’s a teleporting detective—my reaction, which could be called a textbook response, was, as usual, right on cue.

I was a narrator following the standard manual.

This orthodox narrative was about to end.

Suddenly, without any warning—in other words, "without a gunshot"—the window glass behind Ms. Kyoko shattered into pieces, and almost simultaneously, her small head jerked violently, and her body lurched forward. Then, she collapsed onto the hospital room floor.

The gunshot came afterward.

"M—Ms. Kyoko!"

I screamed, unable to comprehend that the Forgetful Detective had been sniped from afar to silence her after discovering the truth. I called for the detective.

Her white hair was stained crimson with blood.

4

To be perfectly honest, this wasn't the first time someone had committed a heinous act to silence Ms. Kyoko after she had solved the truth—in fact, it happened quite often. Everyone thought the same thing.

After all, she’s a detective who loses her memory when she sleeps.

No matter how much she uncovers the truth or solidifies her deductions, if you can just make her sleep, she'll forget everything about the culprit—various perpetrators have tried all sorts of ways to put the detective to sleep, whether it was by spiking her coffee with sleeping pills, using chloroform, hypnosis, or even boring her with a tedious movie.

So perhaps it wasn't that unusual—that someone would go so far as to shoot a rifle bullet into the brain of the Forgetful Detective.

A rifle bullet.

If something like that literally hits her brain, even Ms. Kyoko, known for her toughness, wouldn't get away unscathed—I wished it had been a tranquilizer dart, at least.

Whether it was fortunate or not that this happened in a hospital, with a nurse present at the scene of the investigation, I'm not sure—but under the nurse's care, Ms. Kyoko was immediately placed on a stretcher and taken directly to the ER.

"She'll be okay! The bullet passed through!"

The on-duty doctor said that, but is it really a good thing that the bullet passed through... especially when the head was the target? Now that I think about it, the bullets that were lodged in the body of the executive in the ICU were all surgically removed... Both of them could have easily died instantly.

The famous detective had been shot.

At this point, I couldn't possibly talk about how cool or stylish or even romantic it was to be falsely accused of being a sniper, and I deeply regretted being too scared of the bullet holes in the window to enter the hospital room... If only I had been inside the room... No, against bullets traveling faster than the speed of sound, it would have been impossible for my giant body to shield Ms. Kyoko.

Especially being tied up with a rope...

I was such a fool to wish for the fastest detective to be faster than a bullet—I had lost all sense of danger. I should never have called Ms. Kyoko to such a perilous scene. Why didn't I call the Gunman Detective instead?

However, even though she was rushed straight to the operating room, it wasn't as if Ms. Kyoko failed to fulfill her role as the appointed detective. Although she was tragically silenced with a bullet before she could reveal the truth she had uncovered, the fact that she was shot actually cleared me of suspicion—the metaphorical rope that bound me was untied.

Because, in what you could call this "second crime," I had an ironclad alibi that no bullet could penetrate—both the police officer holding the rope and the nurse present at the scene would testify in unison.

When Ms. Kyoko was shot, I wasn't at the only possible sniper point in the distant building—yet, as a suspect, the irony is not lost on me. The fact that I was at the crime scene itself became proof that I wasn't there...

Anyway, I waited for thirty hours in the waiting room, unable to sleep a wink, until Ms. Kyoko came out of the ER—I was even more unable to move than when I was tied up with the rope. From the outside, I might have looked like a husband anxiously waiting for his wife to give birth, but the reality was far from it.

If anything were to happen to Ms. Kyoko now, there was nothing left for me to do but cut open my stomach, hang myself, take poison, and drown myself. That was all the resolve I had, a resolve that would atone for nothing—and then, thirty hours later.

The detective, who came out of the ER with a bandage wrapped around her white hair, was no longer a detective.

Amnesia. Loss of semantic memory.

She had forgotten the meaning of 'locked room,' the meaning of 'poisoning,' the meaning of 'suspect,' the meaning of 'deduction,' the meaning of 'alibi,' the meaning of 'motive,' the meaning of 'double role,' the meaning of 'kidnapping,' the meaning of 'DNA analysis,' the meaning of 'narrator,' the meaning of 'headless corpse,' the meaning of 'everyday mysteries,' the meaning of 'mansion,' the meaning of 'stormy mountain villa,' the meaning of 'swap murder,' the meaning of 'twin trick,' the meaning of 'switching places,' the meaning of 'serial murder,' the meaning of 'timetable,' the meaning of 'accomplice,' the meaning of 'family tree,' the meaning of 'bomber,' the meaning of 'luminol reaction,' the meaning of 'confession,' the meaning of 'perjury,' the meaning of 'circumstantial evidence,' the meaning of 'letter of warning,' the meaning of 'narrative trick,' the meaning of 'dying message,' the meaning of 'dismemberment murder,' the meaning of 'staging,' the meaning of 'wordplay,' the meaning of 'secret revelation,' the meaning of 'process of elimination,' the meaning of 'inductive reasoning,' the meaning of 'howdunnit,' the meaning of 'orthodox mystery,' the meaning of 'memo,' the meaning of 'syllogism,' the meaning of 'hidden passage,' the meaning of 'unfairness,' the meaning of 'missing link,' the meaning of 'social commentary,' the meaning of 'gender misidentification,' the meaning of 'late Queen problem,' the meaning of 'blood type,' the meaning of 'inverted detective story,' the meaning of 'Dogra Magra,' the meaning of 'plot twist,' the meaning of 'probability crime,' the meaning of 'nursery rhyme,' the meaning of 'fortune-telling,' the meaning of 'will,' the meaning of 'assistant,' the meaning of 'foreshadowing,' the meaning of 'science mystery,' the meaning of 'medical mystery,' the meaning of 'police procedural,' the meaning of 'picaresque,' the meaning of 'cipher,' the meaning of 'wanted poster,' the meaning of 'disguise technique,' the meaning of 'two-column layout,' the meaning of 'confidentiality,' and the meaning of 'amnesia.'

She had also forgotten the meaning of ‘detective.’

5

"D-Do you at least know Conan Doyle?"

"Of course, I do. He’s that science fiction writer, isn’t he?"

"What about Edgar Allan Poe?"

"The horror writer."

Our conversation was hopelessly out of sync.

If these two giants don't ring a bell, it’s really bad—who exactly am I talking to right now? She’s forgotten not just mystery terminology but the very concept of mystery itself... Of course, resetting her memory is an everyday occurrence for Ms. Kyoko, or rather, it’s literally as easy as breakfast.

But even so, she never forgot that she was a detective, that she was a master detective—more precisely, even if she forgot, she would always remember.

By looking at the handwritten memo on her left arm.

However, if she’s in a state where she’s lost even the meaning of ‘detective,’ that memo can’t serve its purpose at all... It’s like finding an old notebook while cleaning your room and not understanding any of it.

To forget only the knowledge related to being a detective...

Is such a convenient kind of amnesia even possible? No, I’m well aware that there are various bizarre patterns of amnesia...

"After all, she was shot in the brain, so anything can happen. If I may say so, the fact that she’s able to maintain consciousness and speak normally is a mystery in itself from a medical standpoint."

These were the words of the surgeon who operated on her over the course of thirty hours without sleep or rest. Although I’m nothing but grateful to him, his somewhat dismissive tone rubbed me the wrong way.

I guess I'm not a very good person either.

But indeed, when I think about the high-ranking executive who still hasn't left the intensive care unit, it's almost a miracle that Ms. Kyoko is already in the general ward.

"Well, this is her second time, after all."

"Excuse me?"

"This is the second time that patient has been shot in the head. Besides the current bullet wound, there were traces of a previous surgery—surviving two gunshots to the brain is an extraordinary case even for a veteran neurosurgeon like me."

Perhaps his dismissive tone wasn't out of the coolness typical of a famous doctor but simply because, as a rational person, he was taken aback by Ms. Kyoko's toughness—similarly, I, who had been deeply relieved that Ms. Kyoko had survived, also turned pale.

A second time—no, according to one theory, Ms. Kyoko had spent some time working overseas before she became known as a detective. I've heard this from Mr. Kondo before.

Depending on the region she was in, it wouldn't be so strange if this wasn't the first time she had been shot... but even so, two bullets to the brain. I thought that Ms. Kyoko getting shot was as shocking as the magazine Mephisto, a symbol of the neo-classical mystery genre, going out of publication, but when I think about it, Mephisto had previously been on hiatus and then relaunched.

"This time it was a rifle bullet, but the previous time it seems it was a 9mm Parabellum round from what you'd call a handgun."

In other words, the first shot was fired at close range.

Remembering that conversation, or rather symposium, I suddenly had a thought—somehow, I, and we, had assumed that the Forgetful Detective's amnesia was a psychological condition, but maybe that's not necessarily the case?

Losing memory due to a traffic accident is a common trope in comics and is often criticized as a convenient plot device, but similarly, could Ms. Kyoko's amnesia be due to a bullet she took in the past—and now, it has unexpectedly happened again.

It was a bizarre and outrageous story, but it was certainly a miracle that she was even alive.

Anything was possible.

Or—anything could be dormant.

"..."

No.

Maybe, in a way, this is fine, I thought—I had been clinging to Ms. Kyoko's bedside trying to remind her that she was a detective, bombarding the convalescing detective with all sorts of impertinent mystery terms, but perhaps I had something better to do than to continue to burden her like this, with a dictionary in one hand and a torrent of words in the other?

Contacting her relatives—which would be difficult.

As far as I know, Ms. Kyoko is completely alone in the world.

I've never heard her talk about her parents, siblings, or, of course, a spouse.

Due to the nature of the Forgetful Detective, she hardly has any close relationships with people, even if they aren't relatives... I'm sure there are lots of other regular clients besides me (including police officers among them), but they probably have reasons why they don't want to be contacted in situations like this, which is why they hire the Forgetful Detective.

That's how it is.

The fact that she continues to be a detective while losing her memory every single day means she continues to lose her connections with society, with the world, with other people—it's isolation. Is it really okay that the only person by her side when she was shot and nearly died was someone like me, the False Accusations King?

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

There is nothing else.

In that case, this is perfect. Today is the turning point.

If she has forgotten that she is a detective, if she has forgotten the meaning of being a detective—then there is no longer any reason for Ms. Kyoko to be a detective. Although she once said that being a detective suited her, if she has now lost even the nuance of that feeling, then there is no need for her to cling to thrilling mysteries.

It's time to graduate from dangerous adventures.

I had thought before—several times—about whether Ms. Kyoko should continue being a 'master detective.' But this time, the situation is different. After all, she was shot—this time because she got close to the truth.

If I were her family, or her friend—if I were her lover, for that matter—I would tie her up with that rope and force her to retire.

In any profession, you normally retire after being shot.

And this was the second time—the first at close range, the second from a distance—how much has to happen in someone's life for them to be shot twice?

In Japan we say that what happens twice will happen three times, but a third time must never happen.

Then what I should be doing is not struggling so desperately to restore her to her detective ways—yes, let's go shopping for clothes. How long do you plan on keeping our fashion leader in those purely practical hospital clothes? Let's find a promising new designer and buy this year's latest collection.

"Really, you're such a strange person, Mr. Kakushidate," Ms. Kyoko said, looking at me in disbelief.

"After all, you're the sniper, so you should be turning yourself in to the police as soon as possible. Is this really the time to be fussing over me?"

"…What?"

There's never a time when I shouldn't be fussing over Ms. Kyoko, but… what did she just say? I was already thinking about booking a flight to Florence for shopping, but that thought was immediately interrupted by what she said—'Mr. Kakushidate'?

Sure, I am indeed Yakusuke Kakushidate, without a doubt—but how does Ms. Kyoko know that? How has she not forgotten? Did I, after Ms. Kyoko fell unconscious and woke up after her major surgery, introduce myself at some point? Was there really a moment for that?

No, even if I did squeeze in my need for recognition—'sniper'?

Did she just say I'm the sniper?

"After all, just a little while ago, weren't you being led away by a police officer, tied up with a rope? Since you were captured by the police, you must be the sniper, right?"

She's saying something incredibly naive, as if false accusations don't exist in this world, but leaving that aside—how does she remember that too? Even though she's a detective who absolutely adheres to confidentiality?

Huh? ‘Just a little while ago,’ she said? The fact that I was tied up with a rope should be something Ms. Kyoko had already forgotten as an event from ‘yesterday’—even if I’m not sure whether I introduced myself, I definitely didn’t explain the details of the case. And who would willingly talk about the disgrace of being tied up?

My false charge had already been nearly cleared—so it’s disappointing that Ms. Kyoko is saying something as if she were a regular person, like ‘once you’re captured, you must be the culprit,’ but if she remembers that…

It’s impossible for someone to be shot through the brain and not lose consciousness… Also, it’s impossible to undergo brain surgery without anesthesia, right? So naturally, everything should have been reset—my name, and the fact that I was tied up.

Wait, wait, don’t get ahead of yourself. Think calmly. You’re a cool guy.

Organize your thoughts. Deduce.

Loss of episodic memory and loss of semantic memory.

I had been confusing the two until now. I was thrown into confusion when I saw that Ms. Kyoko, after waking up, didn’t seem to recognize anything even when looking at the memo on her left arm, but now that I think about it, Ms. Kyoko didn’t seem to have any doubts about the fact that she was in a hospital.

Of course, you could say that since she’d been shot in the head, it’s only natural she’d think she should be in a hospital, but maybe it could be interpreted another way—she remembers being called here because of a request.

She had forgotten about the incident at the Sarashina Research Institute, the phantom thief "Count Kakushaku," the bomber "QRETA 9010," or the "Musical Score" case, the "Bulletin Board" case, but if you think about it, it was the Ms. Kyoko of each day who forgot those things—since she was like a daily calendar, it made sense that she wouldn't know. She hadn't forgotten because she was shot, and even if I had asked her before she was shot, she would have forgotten.

In other words, the memory Ms. Kyoko lost due to the sniping-induced unconsciousness this time should be limited to what happened on the day she was shot—but if she remembers that, the story changes entirely.

Physical, not psychological, memory loss…

Two gunshots to the brain… if the second rifle bullet overwrote the effects of the first 9mm bullet…

Or maybe it could be put this way:

The Forgetful Detective forgot that she had memory loss.

"..."

I don't get it.

Ms. Kyoko could pretend she hadn't lost her memory, or conversely, she could pretend to have memory loss even though she hadn't slept. The master of disguise is also an accomplished actress. She might have simply deduced what happened from the fragments of my words—even if she's forgotten the meaning of 'deduction,' it's not like she's lost the ability to make ordinary human guesses.

Then… I suppose I have no choice but to test it.

A memory test.

But it can't just be a simple memorization quiz; it has to be a question that only Ms. Kyoko could answer—or more precisely, that only the Ms. Kyoko of 'yesterday' could answer.

In other words, it has to be the truth.

The truth that the real culprit tried to silence with a rifle shot—the truth of the case—I'll get Ms. Kyoko to answer that, without using any mystery terminology.

It's starting to feel like a tabletop game where you have to avoid taboo words, but I'm dead serious. At the same time, this would completely clear my false accusations—while I'm certainly not the sniper who targeted Ms. Kyoko, there's still suspicion that I might have been the one who shot only the first victim, the executive. In reality, I was only halfway out of the woods.

Now is not the time to be coy.

"Now then—"

I started to speak, but then hesitated. Saying 'Now then' before a deduction is already using mystery terminology. Even though the rope around my waist has been removed, I'm still tied up in this unexpectedly strict rule, and the Forgetful Detective, or rather the former Forgetful Detective, looked at me with even more suspicion.

6

"Ms. Kyoko, it might be a bit hasty to conclude that I'm the sniper. You know, maybe you could consider the possibility that there's another real culprit out there?"

"R—‘Real culprit’?"

Oops, is ‘real culprit’ already a violation of the rules? Tough. But certainly, the words ‘real culprit’ conjure up the mysterious image of a hidden criminal behind the obvious one. Mysterious—that is to say, it’s a mystery term. I should probably avoid saying anything that might suggest some kind of ‘plot twist’—I need to make her think it’s a conclusion drawn from purely logical thinking.

…Logical thinking is safe, right?

"No, no, I meant, if you think about it normally, wasn’t there someone else who could have shot the executive victim besides me?"

"Think about it normally—yes, now that you mention it, I think I did think about it normally at that time too…?"

Ms. Kyoko made a vague gesture as if she was trying to recall a blurry memory—but I couldn’t tell whether that motion was based on a reset, or if she was simply still groggy from the anesthesia lingering in her blood after the surgery.

"But, the only person at the construction site, the sniper’s point, was you, Mr. Kakushidate…"

"But, I didn’t have a sniper rifle while I was working, so there’s no evidence—oops—I mean, it would have been impossible for me to snipe the victim from there. And the sniper rifle was later used to shoot you, Ms. Kyoko, so there’s no way I could have gotten rid of the murder weapon using the power shovel or anything like that—"

"‘Murder weapon’? ‘Gotten rid’?"

This is tough.

Uh… let’s see… the ‘murder weapon’ is the sniper rifle, that’s fine, but ‘gotten rid’… ‘destroyed’? ‘Broken it so it can’t be found’?

"Yes… that's right. If that’s the case… then you, Mr. Kakushidate… might not be the culprit…?"

Supporting her bandaged head, Ms. Kyoko muttered in a muddled voice—as if she was enduring a headache. Well, I mean, she had literally just been shot in the head, so it was probably more than just a headache.

"But even so—you still seem suspicious… you’re acting strange, like you’re the culprit…"

If she’s instinctively seeing through my predisposition to false accusations, then she really is a natural-born detective, and I can’t help but be impressed, but even so, those words still hurt.

However, I couldn't just reveal the ironclad rule of mysteries: 'The one who seems least likely to be the culprit is the real culprit.'

I must keep the conversation normal, and dig up Ms. Kyoko's deduction.

"…Did the culprit shoot from somewhere else, other than the upper floors of the building where you were, Mr. Kakushidate?"

"But, there's no other sniper point with a clear shot at that hospital room. If I'm not the culprit, then how exactly did the culprit shoot the victim…"

Why am I narrowing down the possibilities to make myself the culprit? It's baffling, but it can't be helped. This is just a transit point on the way to the truth.

"Even if it was shot from another location, couldn't the wind or a difference in air pressure have somehow made it work?"

This is such a frivolous hypothesis, completely unbefitting of a great detective… I can't believe Ms. Kyoko from thirty hours ago would have come up with such a haphazard theory. Has she really forgotten everything? Has the truth about the sniping been completely erased and reset? No, first, I need to remember.

What did Ms. Kyoko say that day? As a true detective, she must have hinted at the truth before solving the mystery.

Surely, she laid some clues.

Today, I'm the one who has to say that iconic detective phrase—'What did you just say?'

"…Even if it was from a different location, if there was some sort of marker, isn't there a possibility it would be easier to target that hospital room?"

"'Possibility'…?"

"A possibility in the mathematical sense. Like a weather forecast. Or in the sense of the possibilities that children have. It's infinite. I'm not saying anything mysterious here!"

Though I didn't want to get so overbearing with Ms. Kyoko, I had to raise my voice and push through without backing down. If 'possibility' becomes a forbidden word too, I won't be able to say anything at all.

"…So, did you use a high-performance laser pointer or something, Mr. Kakushidate?"

My suspicion still hasn't been cleared.

And it wasn’t a laser pointer.

"Well, um... the victim was smoking that, right?"

"Smoking meat?"

"No, not that... smoking with the thing that's not a pipe, nor a cigar…"

"A cigarette? Now that you mention it, they were a smoker."

Ms. Kyoko said, as if she was remembering—"as if" she was remembering.

This is impossible for the Forgetful Detective, who resets everything.

"'The cigarette’s flame as a target'—when you told me that, I definitely nodded. I thought, ‘Exactly.’"

The playback of the memory that was triggered doesn’t stop.

The deduction that should have been forgotten is reviving inside Ms. Kyoko—but I can’t let my guard down here. I need to push through to the end without using any mystery terminology, or I won’t be able to prove anything. To reach Q.E.D.—no, Q.E.D. is off-limits. We, as citizens of the Mystery Kingdom, can’t insist that it’s a mathematical term. It’s more impossible than an impossible crime.

"So, Mr. Kakushidate, you shot using the cigarette as a target. Or maybe you had a moth perched on the tip of the bullet. Like a summer insect that flies into a flame, you're saying that moth homed the bullet to the cigarette light."

"Please wait. There’s no way Ms. Kyoko would have such a foolish hypothesis—no, such a foolish fantasy."

Maybe it could be one of the exhaustive deductions, but I can’t use that term either. And casually, I’m still being treated as the shooter—was it really this hard to clear my name unless the other party was a master detective?

"In the first place, it was a no-smoking zone, so they wouldn’t have smoked in the hospital room. They were hospitalized because of a lung condition, and the attending physician must have strictly forbidden it."

"Even if it was forbidden, wouldn’t they have secretly smoked?"

Ah, I see. I myself don’t smoke, so I can’t fully understand the feeling, but I’ve heard that tobacco addiction is even stronger than alcohol. We heard that they were a heavy smoker who got lung cancer, so they were forbidden to smoke, but conversely, being such a heavy smoker might make it difficult to quit. But—

"But there was almost no smell of cigarettes in the hospital room… right?"

Before I could prompt her, Ms. Kyoko said it first—remembered it.

"In other words, he didn’t smoke in the hospital room—so the biological weapon plan using the moth’s nature couldn't have been executed…"

I was surprised that she had even considered such a plan—but ‘biological weapon’ isn’t a mystery term, is it? If you call it an animal trick, one would probably think I was talking about something else entirely—but anyway, Ms. Kyoko continued.

"…But if it was outside the hospital room, he might have smoked there."

"? Ah. There might be a smoking area somewhere. Even doctors and nurses smoke. It would be unreasonable to completely ban smoking in the hospital. Both air and human rights must be protected. So, maybe it’s set up in some inconspicuous place…"

But it would be unwise for a seriously ill patient who was forbidden to smoke to be seen enjoying a cigarette at the smoking area. No matter how much of a high-ranking executive he was, that kind of recklessness wouldn’t be acceptable. In that case—rather than an inconspicuous place, it must have been somewhere completely out of sight—somewhere close enough to his hospital room that he could quickly return in case of emergency, but out of sight—maybe at the far end of the hallway, or in an empty room—

"Perhaps he opened a window and took a puff—now I remember that I thought so on that day."

She said it so casually that I didn’t immediately realize it was the key sentence to solving the mystery. Without striking a pose, without adding a catchphrase. It wasn’t at all like a detective solving a mystery.

But the mystery is solved.

I see, I guess people don't use the line ‘smokers forced to smoke outside’ anymore, but… if you’re going to smoke secretly, you’d choose a place with good ventilation, where the smell wouldn’t linger and where you wouldn’t easily be caught—in fact, it could have been the rooftop.

In any case, the executive was sniped while smoking somewhere other than his hospital room, somewhere more open—from a different sniping point that had a clear line of fire.

What happens when someone gets sniped? Would they collapse on the spot like Ms. Kyoko? In most cases, yes. However, if they didn't collapse, they would instinctively try to get away from the scene with all their might, fleeing to a safe place. Instinctively. Driven by their survival instinct. They would hide behind something, or curl up on the ground—if they were smoking within a distance where they could quickly return to their hospital room if seen by a doctor or nurse, they might instinctively dash back there.

And if they reached the room, felt relieved, and then lost consciousness.

It could be made to look like they were sniped in the hospital room—by the victim's own desperate escape behavior.

The fact that the sniper rifle, which is a deadly weapon, didn't cause an instant kill, and the fact that not a single bullet exited the body—maybe the sniper wasn't incompetent, but instead, it was all according to plan. If the victim died instantly, they wouldn't have been able to perform the calculated escape behavior, and if the three bullets had passed through the body, the bullets or the bullet holes left in the walls or floor would have remained at the real scene as evidence.

If that's the case—this sniper is a real pro.

The epitome of accuracy.

And the bullet holes in the hospital room's glass window?

That was obviously made beforehand—using a tool to carve out a bullet-sized hole. Now that I think about it, it was strange. Three bullet holes in the window glass? But that was just ordinary window glass, not bulletproof or anything—the window of a VIP room or not, if a rifle bullet directly hit it, it would shatter into pieces with just one shot, let alone three.

Just like when Ms. Kyoko was shot, it would shatter into pieces.

So, at least speaking for myself, I should have realized the truth at that moment—though it would be hard to expect me to think that way when Ms. Kyoko was shot right in front of me.

Ah, now it's clear. When Ms. Kyoko was looking through the window glass holes as if they were binoculars, staring at the construction site that was considered the sniper point, she wasn't actually looking at the distant building under construction.

She was examining the bullet holes themselves.

To see whether they were real holes made by a rifle bullet, or just fake bullet holes—if they were fake, the act of disguising them wouldn't be that difficult. If it wasn't uncommon for the victim to leave his hospital room for tests or smoking—then flipping that fact around might lead to identifying the culprit.

A person who could have disguised an unoccupied hospital room. And someone who could have dealt with the bloodstains that must have been scattered along the escape route from the secret smoking area to the hospital room—their primary physician was unlikely to be involved, but it could be a hospital staff member or someone disguised as such…

"—But well, haha, I was overthinking it a bit that day. It's laughable. There's no way anyone would go to such lengths and devise all those schemes just to kill one person. That's not realistic at all. You shouldn't do that, Mr. Kakushidate. No matter how much you don't want to admit you're the culprit, you shouldn't concoct such baseless fantasies."

In stark contrast to my spiraling tension, Ms. Kyoko blithely dismissed her own deduction as mere fantasy—and then, she added:

"You're the one who shot me, too, right, Mr. Kakushidate?"

7

In the context of a mystery, once a person is cleared of suspicion, they aren't supposed to be suspected again afterward (of course, there are classic tricks that turn that on its head), but Ms. Kyoko's suspicion remained unwavering to the end—it's regrettable, but in any case, this 'revelation' exposed the fact that her deduction, in other words, her memory, had not been reset.

How should I interpret this fact?

The Forgetful Detective, whose memory resets every day, has now become an Unforgetful Detective, whose memory isn't reset whether she sleeps or not. Rather, her memories were now firmly etched in her mind. Even before, during her Forgetful Detective days, her short-term memory within a single day was so extraordinary that she could perfectly recite a book after just one reading. In other words, Kyoko Okitegami has lost both her characteristic of absolute confidentiality and her title as the fastest detective—because she no longer needs to solve cases within a single day.

The slogan "Ms. Kyoko only has today" becomes a thing of the past. It becomes yesterday's slogan.

Ms. Kyoko now has yesterday, and she also has tomorrow.

But in exchange, and as the price, she has lost the meaning of mystery terms.

At the same time she lost 'forgetfulness,' she also lost her 'detectiveness.'

Some might say, "So what?" Indeed, it's likely that Ms. Kyoko will find it difficult to continue her detective work from now on—she may not be able to maintain that impregnable Okitegami

Building. Still, considering her accumulated savings, she probably won't be left wandering the streets until she finds her next job—'miser' isn't a mystery term.

Quitting being a detective doesn't mean she'll die. In fact, it might give her a better chance at living longer.

That's what I thought, too.

It was a loss of identity, but it was better to be safe than sorry—there's no need to cling to a profession that carries the risk of being sniped. From now on, instead of saying, "Where am I? Who am I?" she'll just tilt her head and ask, "Where is Baker Street? Who is Sherlock Holmes?"—there will be no disruption to her life. None at all.

It's a happy ending, a grand finale.

But when it's taken to such an extreme, I can't help but think… in the context of a mystery, I can't help but think.

Wasn't that what the sniper was aiming for?

Ms. Kyoko's deduction, which she remembered, was indeed a surprising truth, but if I had to say, it was somewhat sloppy… even if the bloodstains outside were wiped away, the 'luminol reaction' would still remain, and even if the bullet holes in the window were faked, I can't imagine that 'forensic science' wouldn't reveal it. It's hard to believe that such a plot was devised by a highly skilled sniper. As Ms. Kyoko herself ironically said, there's no way anyone would go that far just to kill one person—what was the point of misdirecting to make it seem like the 'crime scene' was 'misidentified'?

If there was a point—it was 'me.' By making it temporarily appear that the executive was shot in the hospital room, the skilled sniper was able to frame me for the crime… don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that I, of all people, was the true target of the sniper's aim out of some egotistical delusion.

I'm suggesting that the true target—was Kyoko Okitegami.

They framed me, forced me to call a detective. Of course I would call a detective, that's just the kind of creature I am—and connecting the speed of the bullet with the fastest detective is, in hindsight, a fool's logic.

And as soon as the Forgetful Detective arrived, the sniper mercilessly shot a rifle bullet into her brain, 'to silence her.'

To silence her. To keep her quiet.

But what if that motive was the real disguise?

If Ms. Kyoko’s ‘detectiveness’ was so thoroughly taken away, not by mere coincidence, but as intended by the true culprit—then that would be a different story.

That’s neither amnesia, nor loss of identity—it’s murder.

The murder of Kyoko Okitegami.

Could this all be just a conspiracy conjured by a mystery-obsessed mind? Am I over-interpreting the culprit’s intentions? Isn’t it enough to accept that a high-ranking executive in a large corporation was shot due to internal strife? Am I just craving an unexpected motive? Am I going too far with the whydunit? Should I "think normally" and conclude that it was impossible to deliberately induce amnesia or make amnesia disappear, and that once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth?

But maybe, just maybe.

Perhaps the first bullet that pierced her brain was also fired with that intention—there might be such a trajectory. Connecting point to point, I ended up making this deduction. Even though I’m not a detective. There might be two contrasting bullets—the one that made her the Forgetful Detective and the one that made her the former Forgetful Detective. There might be some connection between these two bullets… a ‘missing link.’

What a foolish fantasy.

If I were to take my thoughts this deep, I might as well have gone a step further at this point and made an even bolder, more outlandish interpretation. For example, the 9mm bullet that first pierced Ms. Kyoko’s brain. The first bullet that made her the Forgetful Detective—what if it wasn't fired by someone at close range in a foreign gun-owning society, but was fired by Ms. Kyoko herself into her own brain in order to become the Forgetful Detective?

However, I, her client, being both obtuse and forgetful, would forget about it and end up making a shallow, if not deep, dive into the tomorrow of the former Forgetful Detective, who had lost her function as a detective in exchange for regaining yesterday, and would make an even bigger fool of myself.

As if that had been the target all along.

Kyoko Okitegami's Sniper—Remembered

第二話　掟上今日子の地雷原

Ch 2: Kyoko Okitegami’s Minefield

1

There are rare but real cases where people survive after being shot in the head without dying instantly, and while it’s a miraculous occurrence, it’s not entirely unheard of as a plot in entertainment. I'm not very knowledgeable, so I can't immediately recall specific titles, but there must be plenty of mysteries that fit the bill.

However, surviving a second bullet after the first is not just miraculous—it borders on being an unfair trick. Even if it means being stripped of the title of "master detective," I can't help but object.

That said, after hearing the attending physician’s detailed explanation, it seems that what happened wasn’t entirely impossible. In fact, it could be said that precisely because she survived the first bullet, the second one didn’t prove fatal… In other words, the second bullet cleanly passed through the hole that the first one had created in her brain, like a tunnel.

The bullet passed through the hole in her brain as if threading a needle.

It’s hard to fully grasp, but based on that theory, the bullet passed from the front to the back without damaging any crucial part of the brain—well, I'm not sure if there are any unimportant parts of the brain, and since Kyoko was shot from behind, the bullet would have passed from back to front.

It’s unclear whether the first bullet was fired from the front or the back, and of course, Ms. Kyoko doesn’t remember anything from that moment—but it’s also miraculous that no significant scar remains. Of course, I’ve never had the opportunity to examine Ms. Kyoko’s head in detail… my attention has always been drawn to her striking white hair, so I never focused on her scalp.

Maybe the surgeon was exceptionally skilled. A renowned doctor from overseas, perhaps.

In that case, I can only pray that the same applies to the second bullet… but that's beyond my control, as someone who's not a doctor. What can I do? What can the False Accusations King do?

It’s obvious. Find the culprit.

Even though that’s clearly beyond my expertise, the fact remains that although my false charges have been cleared, the crucial sniper who shot both the executive and the master detective has not been arrested—no matter how much I theorize, the true culprit, who has committed multiple crimes, is still at large.

No matter how tough or lucky Ms. Kyoko may be, I doubt she can dodge a third bullet… For now, she's been admitted to a private room without windows (ironically, the master detective who cleared my name is now stuck in what feels like a prison), but we can't keep her in the hospital forever.

I have to find the culprit.

I know, I know, this is way too much for me to handle. My shoulders will crumble under this weight. But I can't just hire another detective listed in my address book.

It would be humiliating for a master detective to be the victim and then have another master detective solve the case—it would be the end of her career. For Ms. Kyoko, who is a miser, that would be as good as being dead.

If only she had lost her memory of being a miser instead of her being a detective… Be that as it may, I can't afford to put Kyoko, who has already forgotten all the mystery terms and whose future as a detective is uncertain, in any more danger. A miser who isn't a detective is just a miser.

Of course, there's no one else I can rely on.

As the False Accusations King, I'm not entirely without acquaintances among journalists, police officers, lawyers, or prosecutors, but I can't say I have good relationships with any of them, and there's no way I can let the information slip out that the very detective who strictly adheres to confidentiality has partially regained her memory—that would also be a disaster.

In other words, I have no choice but to solve it myself.

The truth behind the case.

… It feels like I'm recklessly diving into a dangerous case and setting up death flags left and right, but Yakusuke Kakushidate isn't shameless enough to just turn a blind eye here. There are times when you have to do what you have to do, whether you're cut out for it or not.

Of course, there's also the debt of gratitude I owe to Ms. Kyoko for clearing my false charges time and again, but if the culprit's aim was to snipe Ms. Kyoko, then this time, along with the company executive who was the first victim, I was used as bait—it's as if I was forcibly made an accomplice.

An accomplice in shooting Ms. Kyoko in the head?? Of all things?

I'll clear my name of this false accusation, no matter what it takes.

I’m not a master detective, but as a client, I’ve been by the side of countless detectives—and at the same time, as the False Accusations King, you could say I’ve gotten close to countless culprits. So, although I never realized it, maybe by now, I’ve picked up some extraordinary deductive skills along the way? It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that this young Yakusuke Kakushidate has received an elite education in criminal investigation from both sides.

With that hope in mind, I returned to the scene of the crime.

When I say “scene of the crime,” I don’t mean the VIP hospital room where Ms. Kyoko was sniped, but rather, the room in the under-construction building where the sniper was likely positioned—the same room where I was diligently working before I lost my job.

There's a saying, "the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime."

Or “going over the crime scene hundred times,” as we say in Japan.

Ms. Kyoko has probably completely forgotten these idioms by now, but they’re basic tenets in the world of mystery—after much deliberation, I decided to follow those rules.

To the detective in charge, who might still be unconvinced of my innocence, it might look like I’m just the culprit returning to the scene, but well, all I could do was stick to the basics, as Sherlock Holmes would say.

It's probably going to be a wasted effort.

Even though it’s a construction site, walking around the crime scene after the investigation team and forensic experts have already inspected it wouldn’t be productive… but I had a feeling that I had to do something. That feeling was the conviction that even though I'm not a detective, I'm not an 'armchair detective' either. The word ‘comfort’ doesn’t appear in my life, even in the form of euthanasia.

My style, if I have one, is to be down-to-earth, or rather, down-in-the-dirt, using my body rather than my head to think—if I had to say, that’s probably the style that suits me… physical labor rather than brainwork.

Move your feet and hands.

I may have been fired from my job before I was acquitted—though it's a contradiction in terms to say "acquitted" but still "fired"—fortunately, since it was such a sudden dismissal, I hadn’t yet returned my card key to access the construction site, and I still remembered the combination codes for the various dial locks (before you're astonished by my perfect memory, let me tell you that the passcode for all the combination locks is "0000").

For this one illegal entry in the dead of night on a holiday, even the False Accusations King would find it hard to claim innocence.

First, I turned off the security system, then, avoiding the surveillance cameras I knew about, I moved to the designated room using the stairs instead of the elevator—I never thought I'd be so bold, but I guess I can blame it on Ms. Kyoko. Well, if push comes to shove, I plan to use the weak excuse that I came to retrieve something I forgot at work.

To cut to the chase, the results of this illegal entry were predictably unremarkable—the crime scene, which didn't even have the usual wasp-colored 'KEEP OUT' tape, was surprisingly clean and cleared out. It was as if the scene was silently telling me that there were no clues left here—hmm.

I was hoping, against my better judgment, that the assertive perpetrator had left some kind of message for the detective who survived the shooting, like a message claiming responsibility for the crime or a coded message… not that I'd be able to decipher a code, but I was hoping to somehow convince Ms. Kyoko, who's still hospitalized, to help me like she did the other day.

By the way, I've visited her in the hospital several times since then, but no matter how many days pass or how many times she sleeps, Ms. Kyoko's memory doesn't disappear. It's strange to hope for memory loss, and even stranger to call it a recovery, but the rifle bullet took away too much from the Forgetful Detective.

With both her forgetful nature and her detective identity stripped away, what will Ms. Kyoko do from now on?

It might not be something I need to worry about. It's just unnecessary meddling on my part—when you think about it, not being a detective and not having your memory reset every time you sleep is how most people in the world live.

There's a possibility that other aftereffects might remain, but basically, Ms. Kyoko will just become an ordinary person. What's wrong with that?

I feel heavy-hearted, as if I'm thinking about the same thing over and over again, but wanting Ms. Kyoko to remain the Forgetful Detective might just be my own selfish sentimentality—maybe I'm just forcing my misplaced pity on her under the guise of concern.

In the first place, even if I were to demonstrate exceptional deductive skills and arrest the real culprit as the False Accusations Detective (a citizen's arrest), that wouldn't bring back Ms. Kyoko's semantic memory.

I, the False Accusations Detective, speculate that it was the first bullet that turned Ms. Kyoko into the Forgetful Detective, but even so, it's not like she's a broken TV that will return to normal if she's shot one more time.

Saying that revenge won’t bring back the deceased is the kind of line a detective would say in the resolution of a case—no, no, I’m being too negative.

Just because I haven't made any progress doesn't mean this whole thing was pointless from the start... Before worrying about whether her semantic memory or her Forgetful Detective persona returns, I need to eliminate the threat of the sniper who might still be targeting Ms. Kyoko’s life—someone might say to leave it to the police, but I also have this paranoid fear that, depending on how things go, this False Accusations King might get arrested again, this time for real.

In this case, it’s not just paranoia. It’s a realistic sense of danger.

Moreover, if the culprit’s motive wasn’t to kill Ms. Kyoko but to deprive her of her reasoning abilities, and by extension, her skills as a detective, then it’s clear that they’ve already completely achieved that goal, and there’s a strong possibility they’ve fled overseas by now. That would mean Ms. Kyoko’s (and my) safety is secured… but I can’t escape this feeling of defeat.

In any case, there’s no point in standing around forever at this pristine crime scene. Whether the glass has been removed or is yet to be installed—in this room that has the window without glass—I can see the hospital where Ms. Kyoko is admitted—but as far as I can tell, nothing seems to have changed, and I need to get out of here quickly before I get arrested for something other than a false charge—in a way, I need to leave the scene even cleaner than the culprit or the investigation team, without leaving any trace.

With that in mind, I checked my smartphone. I just wanted to check the current time and see when the next community bus was coming, but I ended up confirming something else—it's not that I had an urgent call or email.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

At the top of the smartphone screen, in small letters, it displayed “No Service”—no service?

It’s just two ordinary words that you see all the time, but they gave me goosebumps all over my body. Even if a message notification saying “You’re next” had appeared, it wouldn’t have given me goosebumps like this.

Wait a minute.

Sure, it’s dark and deserted here, but it’s not like we’re in the mountains or a cave… This is a skyscraper in a big city, even if it’s under construction. This isn’t some haunted, abandoned building. In this 5G era, how could there be no service?

Is it a network outage or something? That would be plausible. I hope that’s the case. Please don’t let it be some kind of jamming device set up by someone—please don’t let it be a trap to isolate an unwitting ‘person of interest’ who shows up after the investigation team has already left.

The fact that I wasn’t ambushed by some thug hiding in the shadows was, in a way, even scarier—from the sniper's skill, it's clear that they're on a completely different level than the criminals I've been falsely accused of being involved with in the past. They're clearly different from those who resort to crime—this is the work of an expert.

Now that I can't call for help, are they going to target me next, sniping me from the hospital across the way, in this high-rise building? I quickly backed away from the glassless window—if this was a trap targeting me personally, it was too precise, even more so than a sniper’s bullet. Because not being able to “call for help” is fatal to someone like me, who is always desperate to call a detective.

I can’t use that pathetic catchphrase of mine. That helpless, dependent catchphrase.

No matter how many detectives’ contact details I have in my address book, it’s powerless in the face of “No Service.” I have to escape back to an area with service as soon as possible.

Like someone dependent on their smartphone, or rather, like a smoker searching for a place to light up, I started to rush out of the cursed crime scene in search of a signal—that was a mistake. A huge mistake.

I had completely forgotten my original intention of leaving without a trace—*click*.

Click?

At that ominous sound, I looked down at my feet, which I hadn't been paying attention to.

I had stepped on it. On a blunder. And on a landmine.

3

A—A landmine?

It’s not something you hear about much in Japan; it’s a term used more as a metaphor, like “touching a raw nerve,” rather than an actual mystery term. It seemed so unreal, like something out of a dream, that it didn't register when I first stepped on it… but then again, if I'm going to be pedantic, a landmine is supposed to go off when you step on it. Because it's a landmine. Well, I don't know the exact mechanics of a landmine.

I can’t afford to have unsteady footing now.

If I had reflexively lifted my foot, thinking I had stepped on something weird, I would be a goner by now.

Calm down.

Maybe it’s just a doormat that feels like a landmine.

Driven by a need for escape, I had instinctively looked away, but I cautiously gathered my courage and checked my neglected feet again—ah, damn it, it’s a landmine. The more I stare at it, the more I'm convinced it's a landmine.

There's no doormat here, and if I really try to convince myself, I could almost see it as a manhole cover, but while that's plausible for a road, there's no way there would be a manhole cover on a high floor of a building under construction—though a landmine is even less likely. Of course, I’ve never seen a real landmine in my life of false charges, but I can tell that what I have half my weight on right now is a typical landmine. As obvious as it is to recognize a tiger or a lion as dangerous, this is a landmine. If this isn’t a landmine, then there are no battlefields in the world.

A battlefield—ah, right.

I thought of a sniper as a term related to assassination, but when you think about it, it’s more frequently used in relation to battlefields. If that's the case, I should have anticipated the appearance of this kind of anti-personnel weapon—at least, Ms. Kyoko, with her exhaustive reasoning, wouldn’t have made this mistake.

Who am I kidding, calling myself the False Accusations Detective?

Calm down, calm down, calm down. Say “calm down” a hundred times.

First, don’t move your foot. Absolutely do not move it. Press down on the pressure plate as if you’re trying to crush the floor—it goes against my instincts to stomp on the explosive, but for now, that’s the only way to stay alive. My lifeline depends on it.

Next, remember.

Was this here before? No matter how dark it was, if it had already been set up when I entered the room, I should have stepped on it sooner—I already concluded earlier that there was nothing in the room. Everything had been neatly cleared out. So it makes sense to think that someone placed it here quietly while I was checking the view of the hospital from the window—with my back to the door.

As if they were placing a sushi tray.

What kind of Uber Eats is this?

I let my guard down because I had already confirmed that the room was clear when I entered... but if you ask me, this is too much of a blind spot. Who in their right mind would think that someone might be planting a landmine behind them, silently and without a sound?

So much for escaping overseas.

Ironically, just as I deduced, the culprit had returned to the scene—to commit a new crime.

If we only consider possibilities, Ms. Kyoko's exhaustive reasoning would also account for the possibility that it was pre-installed as a substitute for dynamite to demolish the building, but that's not the case. I can tell, I know. Since I was in charge of working in this room, I can guarantee that this landmine wasn't purchased with the construction company's budget.

It might not be very convincing to say this after ending up in this situation, but to my surprise, I'm not a complete idiot. I figured the culprit wouldn't have gone far, so I didn't do anything reckless like make a run for it—besides, even as fellow trespassers, there's a clear difference in our league.

When I sneaked into this building, it was locked with a card key and a dial lock, and all the other security systems were still active—the culprit managed to infiltrate while maintaining those conditions and laid in wait for me, someone who might arrive at any moment.

It's possible that the culprit followed me and bypassed the security systems one by one after I deactivated them. But feeling guilty, I was careful to avoid being followed, and there's no way they just happened to be carrying a signal jammer, let alone a landmine.

This was a meticulously planned trap.

In a way, it's almost flattering that they put more time and effort into targeting me than in sniping Ms. Kyoko, but I'm really in trouble—this isn't just about blowing me up because I've served my purpose as bait to attract attention to the case.

They intend to blow me to smithereens here at the crime scene, along with the signal jammer probably planted somewhere in this room—under the floor, behind the ceiling, or inside the walls—, to stage it as "the suicide of the real culprit who fulfilled their goal"—even if I haven't honed my deductive skills, as the False Accusations King who's worn the cloak of many unjust accusations, I can read between the lines.

It's a cleanup operation that kills two birds with one stone.

A few days later, my suicide note might reach the police station. A note describing the shocking trick of how I set up a remotely controlled sniper rifle in this very room, along with the tear-jerking motive behind it. I don't think of myself as someone who would go out with a bang like blowing myself up with a landmine, and my suspicions should have already been cleared by Ms. Kyoko, but to think they would reignite suspicion this way—I have to give credit where it's due, it's a brilliant move.

This is no ordinary sniper.

Not just an exceptional sniper, either.

A professional—and not just an assassin, but a trained soldier.

A soldier.

I have no idea why a soldier-turned-culprit would target Ms. Kyoko or me, but this is clearly not one of those cases of "a culprit seeking revenge after being put behind bars by the Forgetful Detective."

Forget crossing a line, this is like being on a battlefield's front line.

Even if it was a moment of madness, this was not a case I should have gotten involved in—no, the moment I stuck my fired neck into this, instead of uncovering the truth, I ended up framed as a fake culprit, thereby helping to bury the case in obscurity. What a fitting end for the False Accusations King.

I've been made not just an accomplice but the mastermind.

Normally, under such circumstances, I would have Ms. Kyoko clear my name, but that very Ms. Kyoko has currently lost her abilities as a detective—without even waiting for a trial, the moment I'm blown to bits, my guilt will be set in stone.

Sigh. Okay, let's sit down for a moment.

I found out that maintaining the same standing position for an extended period is quite tough—if that's the case, then the punishment of making students "stand in the hallway" back in school was pretty reasonable. I was often made to stand there due to false accusations, but I didn't realize it at the time, probably because there were no landmines in the hallway. While trying to keep as much weight off the foot that's on the landmine, I lowered myself to the floor… I've heard that many landmines are designed not to kill but to merely maim, but judging from the size of the one I'm stepping on, it's not the kind that would let me off with just losing a foot. Let's think positively, it helps to not dwell on the negative. There's no point in always looking down; there might be a landmine.

Let's take it as good news that I can't catch the culprit even if I chase after them now, and that if I were to run into them, I, a civilian, would be more likely to be killed.

Assuming the culprit is already far away from the construction site to avoid getting caught in the landmine explosion—they might be within a distance where they can confirm the explosion with binoculars—the fact that there's no sign of it exploding or any countdown sounds means it's neither a remote-controlled type nor a time-bomb type.

It seems more likely that it's a primitive trap where the explosives are triggered the moment I lift my foot off the pressure plate. In other words, if I had the skills of a bomb disposal expert, I could survive this—but of course, I don't have those skills.

I've been fired from many jobs, but I have no experience in bomb disposal. This was a major oversight. Can't I just cool it down with liquid nitrogen or something? Is there a red wire or a blue wire I need to cut? I don't even have liquid nitrogen, let alone wire cutters.

I lack both the skills and the tools.

If I try something reckless, it'll just turn into an outright suicide.

Should I at least leave a dying message? For Ms. Kyoko.

I could bite off the tip of my finger and write in blood on the floor that "This is a false charge. Don't be deceived. I wasn't a suicide; I was murdered," but no matter how well I write it, it'll be blown away in the explosion. What a well-planned howdunit. Besides, even if I left behind a brilliant dying message, Ms. Kyoko, who's forgotten the meaning of the term "dying message," might dismiss it as legally invalid.

I really need to focus on surviving. Naturally.

Logically speaking, "shouting for help" might be the most effective method. But it's late at night, and no matter how loud I scream inside this soundproofed construction site, it's fifty-fifty whether the sound will reach outside—and even if it did, it might reach the culprit's ears as well.

It would be best for them if I just died quietly, but if I make too much noise, they might come back to finish the job—even if they don't come back, they might snipe me from a distance… While I'm sitting here, unable to move my foot, I should at least try to shift to a position where I'm less exposed from the window.

Damn it, I thought being an armchair detective was the furthest from my calling, but I never imagined I'd end up sitting on the floor, without even a cushion, racking my grey brain cells. And at this rate, those grey brain cells will get toasted to a crisp brown.

With a brain like that, even if I don't get shot, I won't be able to come up with any decent ideas.

In that case, I have no choice but to use what is often called the second brain for modern humans: my smartphone, which unfortunately has no signal.

Smartphones are often touted as a universal tool, but when they're out of range, most of their functions are limited… and now's not the time to kill time with offline apps until I die.

However, conversely, if I can get it back in range, I could easily escape this crisis—modern science is a wonderful thing that completely ruins the classic mystery settings of "a mansion during a storm" or "a remote island," but just this once, I'll cling to it.

That said, there's no way for me to find the signal jammer that's likely hidden somewhere in this room. If I could thoroughly search the room, I'd eventually find it, but that's only if I wasn't standing on a landmine.

In other words, I can't get reception in this room.

But what's easy to overlook is that the most remarkable feature of a smartphone is that it's small and light compared to all its functions. Its portability is its greatest asset. The reason it's so widespread globally is that it succeeded in becoming compact.

Even if I'm standing on a landmine, both my arms are free, so I can just toss this small, light device out of this room, from out of range to within range.

Durability is also one of the selling points of modern smartphones—of course, they're not as tough as a G-Shock that could withstand an ice hockey game, so I should at least take off my jacket, wrap it carefully, and use it as a cushion.

After all, I'll be throwing it out the window.

I can only guess at the effective range of the signal jammer, but judging from the other tools like the sniper rifle and landmine, it's not an exaggeration to assume it has military-grade functionality. I don't think it's as extreme as a pulse bomb, but it's probably too optimistic to think that tossing my smartphone underhand from the room to the hallway will restore its original functionality.

A few meters won't cut it.

But if I throw it toward the window—that is, instead of tossing it down the hallway, if I drop it vertically from the upper floors to the ground —I can cover a distance of several dozen meters in one go, using the vertical axis instead of the horizontal one.

This plan is based on the assumption that the center of the signal jammer's coverage is this room—if the jammer is set up throughout the entire building, the first floor might also be out of

range—but if they're planning to blow me up along with the evidence by using the landmine, then this strategy might not be totally off the mark.

This isn't an imitation of a master detective.

It's the instinct of the False Accusations King, and it's rarely wrong.

Moreover, even if the smartphone that I drop doesn't perform as expected, at the very least, I'll be able to leave a dying message—I'm planning to use a messaging app, not the phone's call function.

Naturally, it can't communicate while out of range, but there are apps with a function that resends entered messages once back in range—if it works, an SOS should be sent the moment it hits the ground.

It's more of a hope than a plan… but even if it fails, the attempt to send the message will remain in the app's history. At the very least, it will prevent my death from being treated as a suicide. It's careless and shows a lack of digital literacy, but I'll disable the password lock.

Of course, I can't afford to ask another detective for help just to save my life—if the fact that Ms. Kyoko was shot becomes public, it would be a disaster. So, the logical step is to seek help from the local police, who are already aware of the case—since the sniper hasn't been caught, the investigation team for the case, which started with the shooting of that executive in the hospital and eventually led to Ms. Kyoko getting shot, should still be active.

Thank goodness for advancements in digital technology. Although it's a bit ironic since the signal jammer is also a product of digital technology—I carefully wrote down all the details of the current situation and the facts I've learned, then proceeded to send the message.

As expected, the message failed to send.

But that's fine.

I wrapped the smartphone in my jacket, then wrapped it again and again, until it was ten layers thick. Even so, I was still worried about dropping such a delicate device from such a height, so I went ahead and took off my undershirt, leaving me bare-chested, and wrapped it around the bundle as well. If I weren't standing on a landmine with one foot, I would have wrapped it with my pants too, but this was the best I could do—I threw the bundle toward the window with a sense of resignation.

Since I couldn't put any strength into my legs, or rather, since they were already under strain, I was worried that I might embarrassingly fail to throw it far enough to reach the window, but just barely, after bouncing off the window sill, my smartphone fell outside the building—I couldn't help but feel a sense of regret after throwing it, and now all I can do is hope it survives.

Whether the local police have a bomb disposal unit is another matter entirely—as the False Accusations King, it's a rather novel experience to be relying on the police so naturally.

Ah, as soon as I ran out of things to do, my leg started to go numb—if possible, I'd like to switch between my right and left legs, but a primitive landmine wouldn't allow for even that brief moment of relief. After some thought, I pressed down on the leg that was on the landmine with my other foot to fix it in place—to prevent my numb leg from cramping and inadvertently lifting off.

I can only hope that help arrives before both legs go completely numb. Don't worry, since it's coming from the False Accusations King, you can trust me: the Japanese police are excellent—especially their remarkable mobility, which is particularly noteworthy. Once they receive a report, they usually arrive at the scene within ten minutes. They're the fastest law enforcement agency, even quicker than the fastest detective.

I'll treat the uncomfortable posture as a stretch to relieve muscle tension and wait for rescue as comfortably as possible.

4

Morning came.

It was a night that felt like an eternity, but morning came nonetheless… and still, no help arrived.

This must mean there was some kind of miscalculation—I once stayed up with Ms. Kyoko for four or five nights straight, as she needed to avoid sleep so her memory wouldn't reset, but this night felt longer than those 120 hours combined.

Although, to be honest, it was Ms. Kyoko who stayed up all night back then, while I managed to get some decent sleep, so it's presumptuous to compare it to just one all-nighter, but even Ms. Kyoko wasn't stepping on a bomb while staying awake back then.

If I even sleep for a moment, not only would my memory not be erased, but my entire existence would be wiped out—tonight was the only night that mattered for Yakusuke Kakushidate.

In such an environment, a minute felt like a day, and a second felt like a week—I didn't realize how tough it could be not being able to sleep at night. If only I had my smartphone, I could have passed the time watching videos… Damn it, why did I throw my smartphone away? Well, it was a matter of life and death, but at least if I had put a paperback book in my jacket pocket… Ah, I threw away my jacket too, didn't I?

When the morning sunlight came through the window without glass, I thought I had lived out my natural life with the landmine under my foot and that death had come to greet me.

Whether morning came or death came, help didn't arrive. Why?

There are only two simple possibilities (my already weak exhaustive reasoning is now reduced to just two hypotheses in this hazy state, so it's more like hazy reasoning). 1) The effective range of the signal jammer is wider than I thought. 2) The smartphone I threw out the window, despite being wrapped in clothes, broke upon landing.

Hmm, probably 2.

It's me we're talking about.

In that case, no one would even see the failed message attempt. Would they bother to go through the trouble of digitally recovering the data from a broken smartphone, even if it belonged to the False Accusations King?

If that's the case, then I wasted the entire night waiting for help—my leg's numbness has reached its limit. It's not just numbness anymore; it's paralysis. I can't feel anything. I never thought I'd truly understand the phrase "my legs turned to lead" without even having taken a single step.

It's strange, but in this situation, my thoughts naturally start to turn in a positive direction… seeking out nonexistent hope. I began to wonder, could this landmine be a toy?

After all, it didn't explode all night. Could it be that it's just a bluff to scare me away from the sniper case, rather than a real threat? Maybe it looks like a landmine but is actually a fake, like a dummy phone… or even if it's real, the explosives and detonator might have been removed beforehand.

Right, what would they gain from killing me?

It would be a pointless killing.

If the sniper didn't kill the high-ranking executive of the large corporation or Ms. Kyoko, then by mystery genre logic, it would make sense to deduce that they wouldn't kill someone as insignificant as me either, right? If so, I can't just sit here. I need to catch up with the culprit who was chasing me earlier—I constructed this self-serving logic and tried to stand up for the first time in about six hours, which felt like sixty years in my perception.

I didn't intend to, but I was simply trying to make things easier for myself—like a gambler who's losing too much and can't stand the mental pressure of continuing the game, so they go all in for one last big bet.

Fortunately, my legs, which had turned to lead, were so powerless that even when I tried to stand up, I couldn't move, not even my upper body. And it was fortunate because just as I was about to muster up some misguided resolve and attempt a second try,

"Ah, there you are. It's been a while, Mr. Kakushidate."

Ms. Kyoko suddenly appeared from the entrance of the room where the signal jammer and landmine were set up—and I wasn't imagining it; she really did pop up like a jack-in-the-box, and "it's been a while" was the last thing I wanted to hear from the Forgetful Detective.

And that outfit.

Before I could even question why Ms. Kyoko was here, or whether she was just a hallucination brought on by my exhausted mind, my thoughts were flooded with questions about her outfit—she was wearing the most unfashionable pajamas, something my imagination, bound by reality, could never have conjured up.

I'm sure she wouldn't want to hear this from a guy who's half-naked, but her outfit was so ridiculously bad that it woke me up. It wasn't just an eye-opener; it was the kind of outfit that would kill a hundred years of love. From the pattern to the design, the fit, and the way she wore it, everything about it was awful. It was the kind of pajama you'd be forced to wear as a form of public humiliation.

Even though her hospital stay had been long and many days had passed since her surgery, she must have thought, 'I can't stay in a hospital gown forever,' and so she seemed to have prepared something casually… but her outfit is so haphazard, it's hard to believe she chose it carefully.

Could this really be the same woman who once swept every Best Dressed Award in every imaginable field, the 'pageant queen' Ms. Kyoko? Did she really come all the way from a distant hospital to this building in that outfit? Could it be that she didn't just lose her mystery-related semantic memory, but also her fashion-related semantic memory?

How much did that bullet take from her?

As I thought this, I couldn't help but wish that she was just a hallucination, or rather, that she *had* to be a hallucination. But when I looked at Ms. Kyoko's forehead, I noticed that, though it was hard to see because of her white hair, it seemed that a folded piece of gauze was taped there with medical tape.

Wait a minute, what's with that simple treatment...?

It's not like she just bumped her head.

Even when I broke my arm, the treatment was more thorough than that... Well, it might be a sign that her recovery is going well, which is something to be happy about, but still, the doctor should at least have covered it with one of those things like an orange net.

“M... Ms. Kyoko, is that really you?”

“Yes. I’m Kyoko Okitegami. Though I’m no detective, Mr. Kakushidate.”

“W-Why... are you here?”

It's true that I was hoping for help.

And when I came to my senses, I realized how baseless my assumption had been that this landmine was a fake, and how I was even about to make the reckless move of standing up, thinking I had keenly seen through it—I suppose I can say that the sudden visit from Ms. Ugly Pajamas had just barely stopped me from doing something so foolish.

In that sense, I couldn’t be more grateful.

But if I may be so bold as to complain, as the help from the fastest detective, her arrival was far too late—the real Forgetful Detective would have popped up the moment I stepped on the landmine. Of course, she would have changed into a brand-name outfit before appearing on the main street.

In other words, just as she said, she didn’t come here as the fastest detective, nor did she seem like she was here to save me—why did she visit this room where the sniper who targeted her head might have been (waiting until morning to do so)?

“Ah. Late last night, I got a call from an officer.”

Ms. Kyoko’s speech was sluggish. It’s a minor detail, but normally she speaks more briskly, almost rattling off her words. Her talking speed had slowed down. It was as if she was recalling it as she spoke, but the act of “recalling” itself seemed strange to me.

“He said, ‘We’ve received a strange message that seems to be a criminal confession from a suspect who was not prosecuted due to insufficient evidence, and just in case, we’re asking if there’s been anything unusual around you recently.’”

It wasn’t treated as a report, not even as a suicide note, but as a criminal confession.

It seems the cushioning effect worked, but no wonder help didn’t come. Moreover, it seems I’m still somewhat under suspicion.

But it would be cruel to blame them.

In peaceful Japan, if you report that you've stepped on a landmine and need rescue, it's more likely to be dismissed as a prank—I hadn't considered that possibility. We weren't able to share a sense of urgency.

Surely the criminal didn't think that far ahead when he decided to use a landmine as a lethal weapon?... If only I had been thinking more clearly, I could have at least attached a photo of the landmine under my foot (my mistake was assuming that the smartphone would be useless offline—I could have taken a picture).

I understand why the police didn't come.

So, why did Ms. Kyoko come?

Please, let it be a detective's hunch!

"I replied that there was nothing unusual, that the suspicious man hadn't shown up in a long time, and then I went straight to sleep. But since I've been sleeping a lot at the hospital, I've gotten into the habit of waking up early, so I thought I'd take a stroll to the address I heard about, thinking that if there really was a landmine, I'd like to see it."

She came here for sightseeing, of all things.

It wasn't intellectual curiosity or anything like that; it was just ordinary curiosity that drew her to the word "landmine," which most people would dismiss as a joke, and she came here out of sheer nosiness, even more naively than I did—it seems that not a trace of the mystique of a detective remains in her mind.

The security was probably still off because I had disabled it, so getting in was likely easy... But sleeping a lot in the hospital, getting up early from oversleeping, it's just a messed-up sleep schedule. And what's this about a suspicious man?

From the perspective of someone who spent the whole night in a harsh environment, it's a statement that really gets under my skin—I was on the receiving end of quite a bit of venting when Ms. Kyoko did her four or five all-nighters, but now I can deeply understand that it was justified venting.

However—even if it wasn't intuition, the fact that she appeared at this new crime scene could still be seen as proof that Ms. Kyoko is, after all, a detective, a point of view that I can't help but cling to.

However, it's the worst possible thing for me.

I thought I was calling for help, but instead, through an unintended game of telephone, I ended up creating a situation where the number of victims could increase. Inviting not just an ordinary person, but a critically injured patient who barely escaped death, into a minefield, could make it seem like I had some malicious intent... There's no way I could explain myself if I were accused of that... What have I done? It's as if I've ended up playing the decoy yet again... and this time, it doesn't even seem to be according to the culprit's plan.

"Oh my. So it really is a landmine. It wasn't a lie. Wow. It doesn't feel like it's the first time I've seen one."

Ms. Kyoko looked intently at the landmine under my foot, without showing a trace of fear—telling me it doesn't feel like the first time she's seen one, as if the landmine were a familiar acquaintance.

Why is she so fascinated by the landmine?

"M-Ms. Kyoko. Please leave this place immediately. It could explode at any moment. Get as far away from this room as possible—"

"Oh. If that's the case."

Ms. Kyoko nodded, looking a bit disappointed as though she wanted to look at the landmine a bit longer, then turned on her heel and left the room—wait, isn't that a bit too cold? Why did she leave so quickly? I came to investigate this crime scene for Ms. Kyoko's sake in the first place—I had to tell myself that there was no helping it.

The Ms. Kyoko right now isn't a detective.

It's only natural that she would prioritize her own safety over solving mysteries, resolving cases, or identifying culprits... And even if her gray cells have lost their function, as an ordinary, good citizen, she should still contact the police.

If Ms. Kyoko, who was shot by a sniper, says so, the word "landmine" won't be dismissed as a prank... which means... it should be about ten minutes, twenty at the most, until the bomb squad arrives?

Will my legs hold out?

Now that the end is in sight, it suddenly feels like I won't be able to make it... In reality, it might just be that I'm sleepy, but I could feel my consciousness slipping away. Forget ten minutes, it was doubtful whether I could hold on for another second, but at that moment.

"Sorry for the wait."

Ms. Kyoko returned. That was quick. Fast.

I was first surprised by her return, as if she had suddenly regained her speed, but I was even more surprised by what she brought back... It was far too practical to be considered a souvenir from an outing. However, if I interpret her quick return as a sign that she didn't go far, then it makes sense as a souvenir—what she had brought back, rolling on a commercial-grade caster, was primarily a bag of quick-drying cement.

There were also containers, water, mixing sticks, a trowel, a bucket, a ladle, and so on—all typical tools you might find on a construction site, and including the caster, it probably wouldn't have been difficult to gather them all from the adjacent rooms.

No wonder she returned so quickly.

But—why a bag of cement?

Could she be planning to build a barricade out of concrete? To seal off the door and minimize the damage from the landmine's explosion? No, that might indeed minimize the damage, but that wouldn't change the fact that I would still be included in that "minimal" damage—

"Ms. Kyoko, what about the police? Or the Self-Defense Forces...?"

"Sorry, I don't have a cell phone."

Oh, that's right.

Even though she's no longer the Forgetful Detective who kept everything confidential, she hasn't signed a contract with a carrier while she's been in the hospital—even if she knows about smartphones and remembers them. If she had time to buy those unfashionable pajamas, she could have signed a contract with a carrier...

"So instead, I brought cement."

Could it be that Ms. Kyoko was hired for this job as my successor, given that she's carrying a bag of cement...? In the Japanese pro-wrestling world, the term "cement" is used to refer to a real fight, but how serious is she being?

Without answering my question, Ms. Kyoko began mixing the concrete right on the spot—and I must say, from my experience working on construction sites, her technique wasn't bad at all. She did it with the same ease as if she were making Turkish ice cream. I thought that losing her memory had made her even more absent-minded, but it seems her dexterity in this area is still intact.

When I see it like that, even her unfashionable pajamas start to look like a unique kind of workwear that's okay to get dirty. On a construction site, standing out to avoid accidents is important, so as an idea, it's not bad. If it were a different situation, I might even be genuinely impressed by her way of showing her well-being through building materials...

"It would have been best if I had liquid nitrogen, but I couldn't find any nearby."

"Huh? What do you mean—"

Ms. Kyoko demonstrated what she meant through her actions.

She scooped up the Turkish ice cream—I mean, the sludgy concrete with a ladle and, as if trying to beat the heat, she poured it over my foot—the gel-like substance clung to my shoe in a slimy, unpleasant way.

To my shoe, or rather... to the landmine.

"Ah... Ah. Ah."

At this point, I finally grasped Ms. Kyoko's intention—once I realized it, no other explanation made sense.

She wasn't making a barricade.

Ms. Kyoko was trying to bury the landmine in concrete—and my shoe along with it. She intended to fuse the pressure plate and my shoe together, fixing them securely—so that even if I shifted my weight with my numb leg, the switch wouldn't budge.

"Please don't take your shoe off just yet. Even though it's quick-drying, the chemical reaction will still take some time."

"U—Uh huh. Is this... really going to work?"

I understood what she was trying to do, but I couldn't help being scared. Honestly. Is there really such a rough way to handle an explosive? Even with liquid nitrogen, there's probably some rationale for freezing the explosive, but even if they're both methods of solidifying, concrete generates a lot of heat during its chemical reaction...

And heat and explosives are a terrible combination, right?

That said, if I move carelessly, my foot could end up encased in concrete along with the shoe, making me even more immobile than before. I guess I should be grateful I'm wearing fully waterproof shoes suited for construction sites... but I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not.

“I think it’ll be fine. Normally, this kind of emergency treatment is done by mixing mud instead. Compared to that, being able to use cement shows how fortunate Japan’s soil is.”

Perhaps she got tired of it, because halfway through, she stopped using the ladle and dumped the entire bucket of concrete mix onto my foot, then looked satisfied, like someone who had finished a good morning’s work—with mud, she would do this? Normal mud?

This isn’t an emergency treatment; it’s more like a slapdash remedy.

Though she spoke of soil, Ms. Kyoko casually revealed a method of landmine disposal that you’d only use in places with no decent materials—it’s strange how she just effortlessly solved the problem of the landmine I had been facing all night.

After all, Ms. Kyoko has lost her semantic memory related to mysteries, along with her abilities as a detective. Yet this handling—which can only be described as the fastest possible solution—is as if the Forgetful Detective has returned.

Even though she arrived leisurely late, her fashion sense is catastrophically unfashionable, and she doesn’t deliver sharp one-liners, this quick response is perfectly in line with the Ms. Kyoko I remember.

The frustrating resolution I reached the other day, full of misdirections, now feels like a lie.

...Could it be that the fact that a landmine isn’t a mystery-related term is what helped this work out? Maybe. In other words, because landmine disposal isn’t detective work, she was able to exhibit her usual brilliance... Her usual brilliance?

What exactly was this unchanging brilliance?

Even if her memory no longer resets, that’s only counting from the second time she was shot, and it doesn’t mean her memories from before that have returned—even though she regained her yesterday, it doesn’t mean the blank period that was once erased has been restored. People say that muscle memory doesn’t fade—but what exactly is her body remembering?

It’s almost as if Ms. Kyoko were a former soldier—one who survived a harsh battlefield littered with, or rather, buried with landmines. I let it pass at the time... but she said it didn’t feel like the first time she saw a landmine?

That’s far too distant from the image of the Forgetful Detective—it’s a hypothesis that was hard to accept, a discordant note in the grand scheme of things, but I can’t explain this situation any other way.

Whether she remembers or not, unless she’s done this before, no ordinary person would think to fix a landmine in concrete. The fact that she came back to a room with a landmine in it in the

first place is not something a normal person would do—even without a cell phone, any normal person would search for a public phone.

This is the way you'd handle things in a place where the police and communication lines were down.

"Isn't it about time? Mr. Kakushidate. You can pull your foot out of the shoe now."

"Ah... okay."

I can't help but be grateful that she didn't run away from the landmine and tried to do something with the available tools, but honestly, I don't have any faith in the rough treatment that Ms. Kyoko provided, so I wanted her to call the police as well—my smartphone should be somewhere under the window... No, wait.

Could I use this situation to disappear? The culprit is so thorough that they used a landmine to try to kill me—neither Ms. Kyoko's safety nor mine is truly secured if we just get through this.

But if the culprit is watching this building from afar, waiting for the explosion, in other words, if the enemy's movements were as fixed as if they were encased in concrete, wouldn't it be possible to escape to a safe place right now? If they see the police sirens blaring and rushing in, the culprit would immediately switch to their next move—but if I can slip away from this construction site silently before that, I might be able to catch the sniper and mastermind off guard.

It's just a possibility... but the only time to take the initiative is now.

In that case...

"Understood. Ms. Kyoko, just in case, could you go outside first? After I confirm you're out, I'll pull my foot out."

"What are you talking about, Mr. Kakushidate?"

Ms. Kyoko sat down next to me, looking into my eyes, and gently smiled.

"I won't leave you alone. And please, don't leave me alone."

"..."

Is she getting nicer? Now that she's no longer a detective.

Come to think of it, even as the Forgetful Detective she would have saved a client who stepped on a landmine in some way, but in that case, I feel like she would have seized the opportunity to negotiate her fee with someone on the brink of blowing up—it's a wonder I haven't been drained of all my assets or buried under a mountain of debt yet. In that sense, maybe my hope that she would no longer be a money-grubber has surprisingly come true.

I can't believe she's helping me for free. It's hard to imagine that from the stingy Ms. Kyoko.

If that's the case, then being the Forgetful Detective might have been nothing but a negative for Ms. Kyoko, but leaving that aside, the "safe place" to return I had in mind at this time was, of course, not the hospital.

It was the Okitegami Building.

A completed detective office, which is like a fortress of security, incomparable to this under-construction or demolition site. If we can make it to that stronghold, I can say with confidence that our safety will be assured—and needless to say, I had another motive.

It was both her workplace and her home. Even though it's not like she's being discharged for the day, if she gets permission to go home, it might stimulate Ms. Kyoko's lost memories, or rather, her pierced mystery-solving brain.

"Huh...? A detective—office... you say? Are you telling me I lived there? Why?"

Ms. Kyoko tilted her head slightly, looking puzzled, as if the efficient landmine disposal she had just performed was a lie—it seemed like she understood the word "office," but as soon as the word "detective" was attached to it, she was completely lost. Still, even if the sound of the word didn't ring any bells for her, if she actually entered the detective office and was surrounded by mystery-related terms that she could see, there was a fairly good chance, at least in my amateur opinion, that the situation would improve drastically—it pained me to think Ms. Kyoko might revert to her money-grubbing ways, but with the possibility of the culprit not having fled the country and being still targeting her, we should definitely continue trying to bring her back as a detective.

Inside that sturdy building, there should be plenty of books authored by Hirubei Sunaga, whom Ms. Kyoko admires—and most importantly, there's that messy writing on the ceiling of her bedroom. I think it's worth having hope. If her memory loss isn't psychogenic, then emotional appeals like this might be pointless, but even so, it's worth trying. Before the enemy launches their next attack...

To skip ahead and get straight to the conclusion, this was exactly the kind of wishful thinking that led to my hasty assumptions. While I was struggling with fear, trying to take off my shoe, the culprit had already initiated the third incident. The military wasn't waiting around for my insignificant demise.

If the first incident was Ms. Kyoko's sniping and the second was the landmine targeting me, then the target of the third incident was none other than the Okitegami Building, the very place I was planning to escape to.

Here's what the eyewitnesses said:

A massive armored tank, its treads clattering, shelled the three-story detective office until it was completely obliterated—

"Kyoko Okitegami's Minefield"—Remembered

第三話　掟上今日子の自走砲

Ch 3: Kyoko Okitegami’s Self-Propelled Artillery

1

The first bullet robbed her of her profession.

The second landmine aimed to eliminate her top client.

So, it was only logical that the third step would involve using a tank to destroy the detective office—the enemy is trying to completely strip Ms. Kyoko of her identity as a "famous detective." However, while their objective is becoming clearer, their true identity remains shrouded in mystery—if it were just a sniper rifle or a landmine, that would be one thing (not that such things were commonplace), but now there's a tank involved, making it seem like we're not just dealing with a soldier, but an entire military force.

What could they possibly want by taking away the one and only thing that defined the Forgetful Detective, her very identity?

What are they trying to make Ms. Kyoko do?

The detective who could solve that mystery is already gone—

2

No matter how incredibly sturdy the Okitegami Detective Agency, known as the Okitegami Building, might be, it certainly wasn’t designed to withstand tank shelling—its robust security was primarily intended to guard against criminals such as burglars, and at most, arsonists; in other words, it was anti-personnel, not anti-weapon. If someone aimed for physical destruction with military weaponry, it wouldn’t stand a chance.

With five shells fired, the building was reportedly demolished in a most brutal fashion. It’s impossible to tell whether my former workplace or this was the actual construction site—as a worker who was fired, I can’t help but be impressed by the enemy's remarkable handiwork.

Given this, I can’t help but feel relieved that I hadn’t brought the former detective into the office to take refuge, thinking it was the wise thing to do. Even if the Forgetful Detective survived two shots to the head, the Okitegami Building would have become her grave marker.

No, that grave marker wouldn’t even be left behind.

Even the ceiling of that bedroom is in pieces—

The Okitegami Detective Agency vanished from the face of the earth overnight—as if this were the final reset.

As a client who visited the agency at least a hundred times, I can't help but feel more than a tinge of loneliness, but to be honest, the feeling of having narrowly escaped death outweighed it—dealing with a landmine was bad enough, but a tank, of all things?

This made me realize that there's no such thing as a safe zone.

In the end, I decided to have Ms. Ugly Pajamas, or rather, Ms. Kyoko, return to her private room in the hospital—I thought seeing her home turned to scorched earth would shock her more than it did me, but she didn't seem to have any particular feelings about it.

It was a bit anticlimactic, but it made sense. Since she has no memory of being a detective, it's only natural that she doesn't remember the detective office, and to her, the empty lot that remains is just a vacant space—devoid of any sentimental value.

I wondered if she thought someone had just practiced slash-and-burn agriculture there.

Even a private room without windows wouldn't be able to withstand tank shells, but practically speaking, she isn't in any condition to be discharged from the hospital yet—in fact, when we returned from the remains of the office, she was severely scolded by her doctor and the nurses for leaving without permission.

To see Ms. Kyoko being scolded...

For someone like me, who was often bothered by her brazen attitude, it was somewhat satisfying.

Well, maybe it's better for now that she stays in a place where the enemy can keep track of her—if the enemy intended to target Ms. Kyoko with a tank, they would have attacked the hospital, along with the other patients, before going after the Okitegami Detective Agency.

The first sniper shot aside, the second landmine and the third tank weren't aimed directly at Ms. Kyoko—the second incident was a result of a client stepping on a landmine and bringing her into a danger zone, and the third was likely an attack on her empty home, knowing she wasn't there.

The target was not Ms. Kyoko herself.

It was to strip Ms. Kyoko of her qualifications as a detective.

If that's the case, then Ms. Kyoko shouldn't do anything unnecessary, like helping a clumsy client—as I ironically forced her to do during the first shooting incident. We shouldn't let her do

anything "detective-like" such as pursuing the culprit or solving the mystery—as I had, oddly enough, forced her to do at the time of the first shooting. That would only expose Ms. Kyoko to even deeper danger.

She was shot by the culprit, so she should just stay quietly in the hospital.

This painfully ordinary, common-sense behavior is the best way to protect Ms. Kyoko—so we must not let her think about it. Where did the tank that shelled the Okitegami Detective Agency come from, and where did it disappear to? We must not let the former detective solve that mystery.

Not solving the mystery is the key to survival.

...No, there's another key that's just as important, and it goes without saying that it's me, Yakusuke Kakushidate.

I'm the key person here, unbelievably enough.

Because the culprit, or rather, the soldier who is the culprit, failed to eliminate me with the second landmine—it's easy to imagine that they'll try again.

In other words, while it's fine for Ms. Kyoko to return to the hospital, it would be meaningless if I stayed in the same place. Rather, I need to put as much distance between myself and the hospital as possible—so that even if I get shot by a tank, she won't be caught in the blast.

"Please, don't leave me alone."

Ms. Kyoko said something so out of character while she was dealing with the landmine, but I'm sorry, right now I have to leave her alone, and she has to be alone—besides, that wasn't a line the Ms. Kyoko I know would say. I mustn't let my judgment be clouded by taking what she says when she's out of sorts at face value and making the wrong move—the priority now is to make it seem like the culprit's plan is going according to their intentions.

I had narrowly escaped the landmine, and I was so terrified of having nearly died while getting involved in the incident that I hurriedly packed up and fled—that's the pathetic role I'll play. Fortunately, this role isn't too far removed from my true nature.

It's almost like it was tailor-made for me.

I had been naively optimistic, thinking the culprit might have already fled overseas, but instead, I'll pretend to be the one escaping—if I do that, the enemy might ease up on their attack for a while. Even enemies need a break.

In that gap, I'll solve it.

The mystery of the tank, that is.

...Ah, yes, this is neither a misunderstanding nor a slip of the tongue. I'm the one who has to solve this mystery—not just because I can't let Ms. Kyoko solve it. There's a very practical necessity.

Even though it was an emergency, throwing my smartphone out of a high window wasn't exactly a brilliant solution in retrospect—while the phone did send out an SOS signal mid-air after leaving the range of the signal jammer, it crashed to the ground about a second later, and despite the cushioning from my clothes, it broke, just as you'd expect.

Hypothesis 2 of my clumsy exhaustive deduction had been spot on.

In other words, the address book that served as the lifeline for the False Accusations King, my drool-worthy list of master detectives, was gone, completely wiped clean—even though asking another detective for help in one detective's time of need is considered taboo, I had thought it would be acceptable as a last resort. As it turned out, I had cut off my own escape route.

Ms. Kyoko may have been stripped of her detective abilities by the sniper, but as for me, I'm rapidly losing my qualifications as a client. Did I have a backup? Of course not. It wasn't that confidentiality was absolutely paramount, but it was the kind of data I didn't feel like making a copy of.

I can't even ask the police for help.

It's painfully clear that I have zero credibility.

To make matters worse, I was even suspected of being responsible for the tank shelling—I was only cleared of suspicion because Ms. Kyoko, the victim whose home was destroyed, provided me with an alibi (though she herself didn't understand what she had "testified" to, having forgotten what an "alibi" means).

In this regard, I have to admit that it was good I wasn't alone—even if that wasn't Ms. Kyoko's intention when she stayed by the side of the man who stepped on the landmine.

So, the False Accusations King will continue to play the detective—despite everything, despite all the failures, I'll continue—as a reader who has always found it frustrating when the famous detective, being too competent, solves the mystery too quickly and thus reduces their screen time, resulting in the Watson figure taking center stage, I can't help but feel rather amused about this development. So, for those who find this unsightly, feel free to skip ahead to the epilogue.

Or you can stop reading here.

3

It’s not like there aren’t any tanks in Japan.

They’re not uncommon at events, and though it’s rare, it’s not entirely unheard of to see them moving on public roads—of course, seeing one shelling a building is out of the question.

Once again, witness reports poured in.

Since I had thrown away my smartphone, I couldn’t keep track of the uproar myself, but while I was struggling with the landmine, the internet was apparently abuzz with the topic—the midnight ghost tank.

With so many witness reports, you’d think the culprit would be caught without me having to awkwardly play the role of a detective, but the fact that they haven’t been caught is the mystery.

Indeed, it’s a ghost tank.

The countless witness reports abruptly stop as soon as it crosses a certain region—just as no one knows where it went, no one knows where it came from. It's as if it suddenly appeared at a certain point.

There are no tracks to follow, no origin to trace.

It’s as if it’s using stealth technology, but such technology is meant to evade radar detection, not human sight—physically speaking, it should be impossible for a massive tank to simply disappear.

That means some sort of trick is being used.

Despite the overwhelming firepower the culprit has been deploying, from sniper rifles to landmines, and now even a tank, they’ve also been using cunning tricks… like the little scheme that misled us about the sniper’s location by exploiting a smoker's behavior. And now, there’s this tank disappearance trick.

If it were me, and I had a tank as my personal vehicle, I wouldn’t bother with any tricks—no, perhaps I shouldn’t dismiss it as merely cunning.

It’s not just about being cautious.

After all, the first sniper shot took away Ms. Kyoko’s reasoning abilities. Not only that, it erased her memory of mystery-related terminology.

In other words, when a trick straight out of a mystery novel is used, the former detective is completely powerless—the only reason we were able to (appropriately?) deal with the landmine aimed at me, a regular client rather than Ms. Kyoko, in the second incident is because there was no trick involved, just brute force.

Without me having to overthink things, the mystery of the disappearing tank is something Ms. Kyoko simply cannot solve—if she were told that a tank appeared out of nowhere and then vanished without a trace, she'd probably just say, "Hmm. Well, I guess those things happen? Maybe it just went into a blind spot or something," and that would be the end of it. It's not about the content of the trick, but the very fact that a trick is being used that helps conceal the crime—this is more than just cunning; it's brilliant.

Frustratingly so.

But on the other hand, wouldn't the culprit be avoiding the risks associated with using tricks?—that's the kind of sharp criticism you see in mysteries, like "Wouldn't it be harder to get caught if you just attacked them on a dark street or something instead of coming up with such convoluted plans?" That's something Ms. Kyoko might say now.

Unraveling the trick directly leads to the culprit's capture—getting to the bottom of the mystery of the disappearing tank will also identify the culprit.

Once again, it's time for the False Accusations Detective to take the stage.

It's become a situation where a detective who's of no use at all has to step up, but before that, I need to pack my things—I need to pretend to have been scared off by the landmine and the tank.

Fleeing overseas would be overkill, and realistically, it's difficult—just like when I went on that trip to Paris, if the False Accusations King uses his passport, the National Public Safety Commission will be alerted.

And while I meant that as a joke, as a punchline, it didn't land as one—talk about unexpected consequences.

When I returned to my completely unsecured home—a two-story apartment without auto-locks, double locks, or security cameras, which can't even begin to compare to the Okitegami Building—

" 'Welcome home, Mister Yakkai.' "

That english line came from a small blond man in a white suit who was waiting for me.

Packing up my things is going to be a big job.

That’s what I thought—after seeing the room, which looked like a tornado had swept through it. Every storage space, from the bookshelves to the cabinets to the closet, had been ransacked, the futon had been stripped of its cover and its contents pulled out, and even the trash can had been overturned—no burglar, no matter how thorough, would leave such a mess.

Just to clarify, I don’t want to be misunderstood—my room is usually as tidy as a model home. Even though it’s just an apartment. Keeping things in order is the duty of the False Accusations King. You could call it a kind of noblesse oblige. I mustn’t leave any room for the curious media to find fault with me when I’m mistakenly arrested. I can’t allow anything that might hint at questionable hobbies. I constantly had to rearrange things to maintain an impeccable appearance—as some say, "abstain from all appearance of evil," which I try to follow to a ridiculous degree. So much so, that I would probably win a gold medal at room-tyding.

In that sense, the False Accusations King is an uncrowned king.

But now, my 1LDK, cleaner than a cleanroom, looks like a tornado passed through—is this Kansas?

The small blond man, sitting cross-legged on the only piece of furniture in the room that hadn't been flipped over, my kotatsu table that's out year-round, was watching me, clearly shaken, with amusement—or rather, I couldn't tell if he was amused or not.

I couldn’t tell for sure since he was wearing sunglasses, so I judged by his mouth. The gleaming white teeth, even brighter than his blond hair, gave me the impression that he was enjoying this situation.

As the False Accusations King, it’s not good for me to make baseless assumptions, but it’s hard to deny that this mess was his doing. And beyond that, his attitude, more than just brazen, could even be called composed, is not that of a burglar, thief, or squatter.

In fact, the atmosphere is the complete opposite—yes.

I said earlier that no burglar could make such a mess, but there’s one scenario where a room could get this messy even without a tornado, and I’m familiar with it.

And it was a scenario that I, of all people, was familiar with.

Yes—when law enforcement agencies obtain a warrant to search a suspect’s home, digging through everything to find conclusive evidence, this level of messiness is actually quite standard.

"A-Are you… with the police?"

Maintaining a wary stance, ready to flee at any moment, I asked carefully, still standing in the entrance without taking off my shoes—the small blond man, also wearing shoes inside, shook his head firmly. Not the police? Then, Public Security? Have they already caught wind of my plan to flee? They're too efficient. Am I being watched 24/7? Is this a search for my passport?

"I'm not police. Not in this country, anyway."

As he spoke, the man lifted the hem of his suit jacket—a badge was clipped to the belt of his pants.

Indeed, the way that badge was worn wasn't typical of Japanese police… sorry for relying on knowledge from overseas dramas, but it was the American style. And the contents engraved on that badge—even without watching any overseas dramas, there's no one on Earth who wouldn't recognize that acronym.

F.B.I.

"Disappointed it's not the C.I.A., Mister Yakkai?"

The small man said cheerfully.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation. Agent White Birch."

"...!"

I felt my body temperature drop abruptly—the F.B.I. in my apartment? I've been arrested by police from various prefectures across Japan, from the Metropolitan Police Department to the most remote areas, and I've even been involved with foreign law enforcement agencies, but to skip over my dream of Scotland Yard and go straight to the F.B.I.?

I closed the door behind me and took off my shoes.

It wasn't as if I was planning to run away barefoot—I wouldn't be able to escape from the Japanese police anyway, let alone the F.B.I. I doubt he's carrying a handgun like the badge on his belt suggests… damn it, this isn't the time for this… when did I become a suspect in a federal crime?

Calm down, there are quite a few states in the USA without the death penalty, so in a way, you could say there's less risk to your life than being arrested in Japan. When you think about it, even Japanese cops carry handguns around all the time.

"Mr. Birch… Agent Birch."

I mustered my courage and spoke—it’s my first time dealing with the FBI, but I've had my fair share of run-ins with the law. As one of Japan’s most notorious suspects, I need to handle this with dignity.

"I’m afraid I can’t offer much hospitality, but would you like some tea? It’s Japanese tea, though."

"No need. I’ve made a rule to drink nothing but red wine."

You'd think he'd be all about the white, with that suit. A white suit, a white shirt, even a white tie.

In overseas dramas, many agents refuse alcohol because they’re on duty—unfortunately, I don’t usually keep any alcohol in my fridge. And speaking of my fridge, it's been completely turned upside down... who flips over a fridge? Should I chalk that up to American strength, or maybe this small man possesses surprising physical prowess?

"Uh… well…"

Normally, regardless of nationality or charges against me, if I were facing an investigator, I’d shout, ‘Please let me call a detective!’ But as I mentioned earlier, I can’t do that right now. Without my smartphone, I’m just a powerless modern man. Should I call a lawyer on my landline? An international lawyer?

"I’m sorry you came all the way from America, but I’m kind of in the middle of something right now… can we delay my arrest until another day?"

"Trying to postpone an FBI investigation? Impressive. As expected of the False Accusations King."

Agent Birch shrugged—it might not be because he’s an agent, but his exaggerated reactions really suit him. I’m envious.

"It's almost like a scene from 'Jailhouse Rock,' wouldn't you say? But don’t worry, Mister Yakkai. I didn’t come here with an arrest warrant."

"Huh?"

He trashed my room this much without a warrant? I mean, I knew that my apartment door wouldn't stand a chance against the FBI, that they could probably open it with a safety pin, that the door itself was about as sturdy as a safety pin when it came to them—but still, no matter how famous the FBI is, they shouldn’t have jurisdiction to conduct investigations within Japan.

So then, what's this guy doing sitting in my room with his shoes on? I was trying to be understanding of his American ways because I thought he was an investigator, but if he's not, then he's just some guy with his dirty shoes all over my floor.

"I don't need a warrant to arrest someone like you. It's true there aren't many states in America that carry out the death penalty, but don't forget, we have sentences like three hundred years in prison. You don't strike me as someone who could handle a jury trial."

"…Your Japanese is quite good."

"Despite the hair, I'm of Japanese descent. Feel free to use difficult words. Like 'starting salary,' 'prosperity,' 'righteous anger,' 'can't be helped,' or even 'gozaru.' Bring it on."

"Okay…"

I've only ever gotten something like a starting salary, so I understand that one, but I'm not exactly rich in vocabulary either, so I don't know the meanings of 'prosperity' and 'righteous anger'… the way he pronounced 'can't be helped' is a dialect from Shizuoka Prefecture, and 'gozaru' was so archaic it wasn't even a word anymore, it was a joke—well, it's a huge relief that I don't have to defend myself in English.

Japanese descent—the FBI is diverse indeed.

"If you're not here to arrest me, then what brings you here, Agent Birch?"

"A word of advice. A warning, if you will."

Agent Birch chose his words carefully, though not necessarily because he was speaking Japanese.

"If you value your life, you'll back out of this case immediately. I strongly recommend that you completely forget about the sniper, the landmine, and the ghost tank—just like the Forgetful Detective once did."

"——!"

I was slow to catch on, but it was a critical moment. I should have realized the moment he illegally entered my room—it's often said that in mystery novels, the narrator's intelligence must be set lower than that of the reader, but this is just too low.

In my defense, double bookings of false accusations are a daily occurrence for me, and getting slapped with a new false charge while I am still trying to clear my name from the previous one is just another Tuesday for the False Accusations King.

And on top of that, the fact that the culprit, who had never shown themselves before, appeared out of nowhere without even making an appointment was completely unexpected.

A mystery novel where the culprit turns themselves in? That's unheard of.

Or rather, this wasn't a surrender, it was a declaration of war.

I was overwhelmed by how my room had been so thoroughly trashed, but on the contrary—it wouldn't have been surprising if this apartment had been blown up by a landmine or shelled by a tank. If they aimed for the weak points, a sniper rifle could easily dismantle this building.

I had planned to pretend to flee, playing along with the enemy's plan, but now they've taken the initiative to prevent me from packing—with the room in this state, there's no way I can quickly pack some clothes into a suitcase.

But even an unexpected culprit had its limits… having a police officer as the culprit isn't uncommon in domestic mysteries, but an FBI agent? That's about as surprising as finding out the culprit is a character not even listed in the cast.

…But it's not just surprising, it also feels off. It doesn't quite click like the satisfying feeling when a master detective unveils the solution in front of everyone. Somehow… I can't fully accept it, even though it seems roughly believable. FBI agents aren't supposed to be soldiers, right?

A handgun is one thing, but sniper rifles, landmines, and tanks… well, I guess that's from a Japanese perspective, where people tend to dedicate their whole lives to one job. Perhaps there are FBI agents with military experience.

He looks about the same age as me, but maybe this small man has way more life experience than I do… still, that doesn't give him the right to shoot Ms. Kyoko.

"Don't misunderstand me, Mister Yakkai. If anything, I'm trying to be sympathetic. False accusations are painful. I was once accused by a friend of being a child molester, so I understand how you feel."

I don't want to be compared to that… it's not okay in Japan either, but in America, that's not something to joke about, is it?

Leave it to a superpower to have false accusations on a whole other level...

"I'm simply looking out for you. As a mere client, you shouldn't get caught up in the affairs of the former Forgetful Detective… especially since you've already had four close brushes with death."

"Four times?"

The landmine incident is definitely one of them… I guess the tank also almost killed me. After all, I was about to take refuge in the very building that got shelled. My instincts are ridiculously bad. And being present when Ms. Kyoko was shot should count as the first time. It wouldn't have been surprising if the missed bullet, or a ricochet, had hit me in a vital spot.

But even so, that's only three times.

What's the fourth? …Is it right now?

Throughout our conversation, Agent Birch had implied that he could have me arrested, or even killed, at any moment, was that it? Was it a mistake to take off my shoes out of respect for Japanese culture…? Maybe I was too hasty in steeling myself against an FBI agent.

"It's impressive that you're still alive, but you're not invincible. You might be trying to change the subject by offering me Japanese tea—like trying to muddy the waters—but I seriously recommend that you run. If possible, leave the country. Even better if you can go to a place where there's no extradition treaty."

Not only does he see right through me, but he's even kind enough to offer such considerate advice… it's becoming increasingly clear that I was in way over my head as a detective. I can't solve the mystery, I can't figure out the trick, I can't even apprehend the culprit—I'm being threatened by the very person who had come to me.

Should I just resort to brute force? Could I, with my height, take him down if I caught him by surprise…? No, no, think this through carefully, big guy. Don't forget that he might have military experience. Even if he doesn't, there's no way someone like me, a big oaf with no martial arts training, could lay a hand on an FBI agent. Whether he has a handgun or not, it would only give him an excuse to shoot me.

I can't solve the mystery. I don't understand the trick. I can't even capture the culprit—but at the very least… I need to get to the bottom of the motive.

Why go to such lengths?

Why destroy her deduction abilities, her clients, her office—everything? What harm could it possibly do to an FBI agent if Ms. Kyoko continues being a detective? Why go to such exhaustive, relentless lengths to eliminate her detective identity?

What kind of conflict of interest is this?

"I mean, with all due respect—what's the big deal? Is this really something that warrants the involvement of someone from a law enforcement agency that represents a country, no, the world?"

"Hmm?"

Agent Birch tilted his head, perhaps surprised by my question—but ignoring his exaggerated reaction, I continued.

"Ms. Kyoko, to me, is a reliable, go-to detective, and I can't even count how many times she's cleared me of false charges. But on a world scale, she's not exactly a highly acclaimed detective, is she?"

The Forgetful Detective who solves any case in a day.

However, the other side of that coin is that she only takes on cases that can be solved in a day. Even I, a regular client and a fan of Ms. Kyoko, would hire a different detective when it comes to clearing up false charges that require long-term attention.

This isn't just a matter of strengths and weaknesses; from the very beginning, there's an unavoidable limitation to Ms. Kyoko's ability as a detective. A limit beyond just resetting.

While it's no secret that investigative agencies and detectives have a casual rivalry in any national system, at the very least, Kyoko Okitegami is not a detective that the FBI would see as a threat.

Ironically, Ms. Kyoko herself said that a detective's work is either cheating investigations or finding lost pets—a common opinion. And there's no doubt that the Forgetful Detective's line of work falls within that scope. You could say that clearing my false accusations is the maximum of what the fastest detective can achieve—even if the Okitegami Detective Agency were to become a century-old establishment, it would never get involved in investigating federal crimes.

There's no reason to eliminate her. There's no need to cross borders, much less break the laws of another country.

"I'm not asking how you made the ghost tank appear and disappear. But can you at least tell me why you're so persistent in targeting Ms. Kyoko?"

"That's why I'm telling you not to misunderstand—if it were my wife, she'd say, 'Don't get the wrong idea.'"

I didn't expect him to be married.

And his wife is a tsundere?

"I even have an eight-year-old daughter. So you don't need to tell me—I know all about Kyoko Okitegami. From before she even became Kyoko Okitegami."

"—Before she became…"

Before she became a detective.

So the FBI has been watching the Forgetful Detective from that time? Like how the Public Security Bureau watches me? I'd heard from Mr. Kondo that Ms. Kyoko used to be based overseas, but could it be that she was involved in federal crimes?

Is this one of those detective-equals-criminal patterns?

"If you must know, I'm her watcher. You could even say I'm a member of her fan club. Since she forgets herself, I observe and record her actions. Not her memories. It's as difficult to clear up your misunderstanding, Mister Yakkai, as it is to answer that question, but let me just say this—do you know the words that were written on the ceiling of the bedroom in the old Okitegami Building?"

"'From today onwards, you are Kyoko Okitegami. You will live as a detective'—right?"

"I'm the one who wrote that."

Back then, I was the only one who could write in Japanese, Agent Birch added, for some reason, almost as if making an excuse—like he was covering up a more specific reason with a plausible one.

"Forgive my bad handwriting. It was really tough, writing those big letters on the ceiling. I couldn't reach—it might've been easy for someone with your height, Mister Yakkai."

"..."

"Handwriting analysis is out of the question now. It's gone without a trace—you mentioned a limitation to her ability as a detective, but it was none other than us who imposed those limitations. However, from our perspective, it's not the forgetting that's the limitation; it's the detective work that's the limitation."

Hmm—what does that mean?

Either way, it seems they wanted to place a strong restriction on Ms. Kyoko's abilities—but now, after all this time, the author of those ceiling letters has been revealed in such an unexpected way, though it's too late now. As Agent Birch said, those crude letters have already turned to dust—it's hard to even verify the truth. He could say anything and make it sound plausible.

And yet, a new mystery has arisen.

If this blonde little man is the one who imposed those restrictions, then why is he now trying to lift them, using such violent methods—this feels less like a mystery and more like a simple contradiction.

"That’s precisely where the misunderstanding lies. It’s a false accusation, Mister Yakkai. A bothersome one, at that."

I've been letting it slide, but maybe it’s about time I corrected him that my name isn’t 'Yakkai', but Yakusuke—though now’s the time to listen to Agent Birch’s story. My name doesn’t matter right now.

A false accusation? Against the False Accusations King?

That denial deeply wounds my pride. Painfully so.

"I didn’t shoot the Forgetful Detective, I didn’t plant the landmine against you, and I certainly didn’t destroy the Okitegami Building with a tank—I’m not the culprit, and I’m not a soldier. I'm at my wit's end trying to figure out how you got that impression."

Oh. Not only did I miss the mark, it seems I might have falsely accused him—well, if he asks why, I can only answer that he broke into my place while I was out and trashed the room, but indeed, now that I think about it, so far, all Agent Birch has done is warn me to stay out of this.

Such a word of advice, which he called a warning, could’ve come from anyone, not just an FBI agent or a culprit—anyone would tell me the same thing right now—it’s obvious to everyone that I’m overstepping by playing the role of a detective.

"B-But then, what about the state of this room—"

"Hmm? From my perspective, I had to clear you of suspicion. It was extremely unlikely, but there was still a non-zero chance that you were the true culprit, staging the landmine incident yourself. Frankly, this overly tidy room was suspicious. It felt like the room of a spy going to great lengths to avoid suspicion."

He's not even remorseful.

It’s like we’ve both accused each other of false charges—being told my room looks like a spy’s, I have no response, no retort to give, but it seems we've gone a bit too far to call it even. You could say we’re at odds.

"I would’ve actually preferred it if you were a spy. If possible, I wanted to protect Detective Okitegami—within the limits of what I can say, it’s something like a witness protection program. Of course, I can’t reveal the details due to confidentiality. But it seems it’s no longer possible to

continue that protection, given the current situation. So now I have to prioritize protecting ordinary citizens. Whether they're Japanese or American—protecting them from White Horse."

White Horse?

Is that the name of the real culprit?

But White… could it be a relative of this White Birch agent? Is this where the revered 'family tree' makes its appearance? No, unlike in Japan, first names come first here, so it's not their last name. But still—

"Any member of the fan club that admires her calls themselves White. It's something that happens naturally, without anyone telling them to. Though in Horse's case, it's not so much admiration as it is affection—though I'm not a soldier, for them, the name White is like a dog tag. A dog tag hanging around Horse's neck."

A dog tag.

Like a license—an identification tag—a license tag.

"To avoid any further misunderstanding, let me say this: Horse and I are neither relatives, nor have we ever met, spoken, or connected on social media. We just love her in different ways—that's all. I don't think I need to explain where the name White comes from, do I?"

Of course, there's no need to say it.

When you say White, it obviously refers to Ms. Kyoko's white hair.

However, even though they're both called White, the White Birch who wrote those words on the ceiling and tied her down, and the White Horse who shot through that white hair, certainly have different ways of 'loving'.

One binds her… and the other strips her.

For what purpose?

"They're a soldier—right?"

I hoped that much of my guess would be accurate, but Agent Birch flatly said, "Not exactly."

"They're not exactly a former soldier either. At the very least, the military they once belonged to wouldn't want them identified that way—because White Horse was dishonorably discharged."

"Dishonorably discharged?"

"Even without adding any mystery to it, they're more of a criminal than a soldier. They're a war criminal."

That tone, even when dealing with the same kind of criminal, felt entirely different from the mysterious atmosphere I expected. As someone who loves detective stories, I wanted to argue that point. But in the end, I could only manage a weak, "I see… Is that so…"

I bit down on the unpleasant aftertaste, as if I had just let someone badmouth a friend.

Not only that, but I found it exhausting to continue thinking about it, so I forcibly cut off my own thoughts.

It seemed that it was true that this little trespasser had tried to protect me—I should be grateful, even if belatedly. The fourth time I almost died—that's what's happening now. It's only because he was in this room that I'm not dead from a landmine or whatever else that was set up while I was out. His search of my room to clear my false accusations might have also been a search for any landmine set by White Horse—but even so, I didn't have enough energy left to say, "Thank you very much."

It wasn't exactly a letdown, but I couldn't shake the feeling of having been played by this "false resolution"—after all, it's not often that the culprit conveniently comes to you.

The image of the culprit that had suddenly appeared vanished just as suddenly—like a ghost tank.

If anything, the enemy's true identity has become even more enigmatic.

Just knowing the alias White Horse had plunged the figure deeper into the darkness—in other words, the culprit is trying to strip Ms. Kyoko of her detective identity, even if it means going up against the FBI.

So—why?

…Could it be that it's not about stripping it away, but about freeing her from bondage?

Lifting a—limitation?

"It seems I've disappointed you. That wasn't my intention. It's not exactly an apology, but I can at least offer you some time to say goodbye to the former Forgetful Detective—I can guarantee your safety for that long."

Agent Birch said sympathetically.

As usual, his reaction was exaggerated, but the sympathy, at least, didn't seem to be an act.

"You said you weren't going to ask me about the ghost tank, but in that case, you might as well ask her about it too. Don’t hesitate. If the culprit—the soldier’s plan is going smoothly, she’ll easily solve the mystery of the appearance and disappearance tricks, just as she handled the landmine."

Even though she’s not a detective.

Precisely because she’s not a detective.

"You don’t have to worry about whether she should be solving mysteries right now—because to her, it’s not even a mystery; it’s self-evident."

5

"Speaking realistically, it would be augmented reality, wouldn’t it? So-called AR, augmented reality. It’s a stealth technology that couldn’t have existed a quarter-century ago, but with that, you can make things appear and disappear at will. Just like the boy who cried wolf, what do modern people do when someone shouts, 'A tank is coming!'? That’s right, instead of running or ducking, they take out their smartphones and start filming. Isn’t it funny how people spend five hours waiting in line for a parade at an amusement park, only to end up watching it through the small screen of their smartphone? Ironically, the brightness of the latest smartphones makes the real scenery look dull compared to what’s on the screen, so when you lift your head, the real scenery seems washed out. You might even feel like reality is harder to grasp because there’s no text overlay like in the videos being streamed. *Giggle*, far from using their smartphone while doing other things, people are fully absorbed in their smartphones. But if all you’re looking at is the smartphone display, then as long as a tank appears on that screen, it doesn’t matter whether a tank is actually running down the road or not, does it? Conversely, if there’s no tank on the screen, then the reality of a tank running down the road would be erased by the augmented unreality. They call it a ghost tank, but in that case, it’s nothing more than a ghost photograph. Whether it’s a QR code or a color barcode, if you camouflage those codes on the surface of the tank or embed them in the road or signs in advance, and then successfully incite people with a simple 'A tank is coming!' shout, the pre-recorded video would just charge forward on their displays. Of course, with added depth and surround sound. Even if the real tank’s path deviates, or people run in the opposite direction of the tank on the screen after it fires, no one would be looking at the real one. It’s a step beyond the stealth technology that fools radar—it’s stealth technology that fools data. And in today’s age of social media, once a flood of photos and videos taken by people starts circulating, that alone establishes a set of facts. Whether it’s a lie or the truth, falsehood or reality, it doesn’t matter—in time, even those who weren’t there will speak solemnly about the tank’s exploits. Of course, this is just the simplest presentation of the idea; in reality, a more complex technology would be used. At the very least, hacking into the smartphones filming the tank might be necessary—if they succeed in using cyber technology to force the download of a dedicated app to all the devices in the area via the surrounding

communication networks, the success rate of the scheme would skyrocket. They say modern battlefields are ruled by computers, and given the massive amount of digital processing involved, the tank itself might have been an unmanned vehicle remotely controlled via satellite. Tactics evolve at a dog-year pace, don't they? Huh? Solving a mystery? There's no way I'd do something so creepy."

6

It was instant.

And as I should say, or perhaps as I shouldn't say, just as she herself claimed, and as the FBI agent had predicted, rather than solving the mystery, it was more like she simply explained what she knew in a straightforward way—yet that was what was most abnormal.

I'm not saying this as sour grapes from a detective who failed to solve the mystery and ended up just pretending to be one, but bringing out a tank, such a grandiose, unquestionable, and crude weapon, only to reveal that the real culprit was a non-existent AR—that kind of mysterious twist is nothing compared to the abnormality of the whole situation.

She knew? She just knew? Ms. Kyoko? This woman in those tacky pajamas? The Forgetful Detective, who can barely operate a modern smartphone, lecturing smoothly about the latest technology, is something that should never happen, even if hell froze over.

'In today's age of social media', she says? Who exactly is this, and what has she done to Ms. Kyoko?

Of course, it must be knowledge she picked up during her hospital stay when I wasn't visiting her as often, from watching TV or browsing the internet out of boredom—the tacky pajamas were probably bought online using the hospital's Wi-Fi, without even checking the size. In that sense, Ms. Kyoko isn't saying anything particularly complicated, and she's not using a lot of technical jargon either. It's all still within the range of general common knowledge.

What she knows, she just knows.

That's fine, I suppose.

Whether night falls or morning comes, if the knowledge she acquired isn't reset and keeps accumulating day by day, it should be something to celebrate—but the way she's using that accumulated knowledge feels somewhat ominous.

A lofty military song, or perhaps the sound of marching boots, echoes.

She casually connected the technology used to enjoy superimposing imaginary figures or game characters onto real-world scenery on a display with a tank—plainly speaking, this is the military application of technology.

She used her knowledge for war.

The way Ms. Kyoko's thought process, now devoid of mystery, is connecting in this manner is, to me, quite terrifying—compared to that, a famous detective eagerly rushing into a murder scene driven by intellectual curiosity or a showdown with the culprit seems almost endearing.

I mentioned her thought processes, but was it because they were shot through that her brain circuits rewired this way? Did some kind of bypass form? Not only was her semantic memory taken away—did it also create a different thought process, one different from a detective?

Did it create it?

Or—did it restore it?

To the Ms. Kyoko before she became the Forgetful Detective, as the federal agent put it.

Making her give up her qualifications as a detective was merely a secondary matter for the culprit. The true goal, the so-called "unexpected motive" in mystery terms, lay somewhere entirely different. The sniper rifle, the landmines, the tank—devices so ostentatious and out of place in a peaceful city—were all meant to stimulate Ms. Kyoko's brain.

Looking at it that way, even though the second incident failed to dispose of me with the landmine, the fact that Ms. Kyoko was made to handle that landmine means that the culprit's goal might have been achieved.

To make her remember. To fill in the blanks, rather than the landmine.

As if an adventurer were scheming to resurrect an ancient weapon, they meticulously and skillfully manipulated events—no wonder the FBI got involved; this goes beyond federal crimes.

At some point, I jokingly said that even the current Ms. Kyoko would understand if I said 'biological weapon' instead of 'animal trick'… but if we're talking about weapons, perhaps Ms. Kyoko herself could become one.

White Horse doesn't want Ms. Kyoko to stop being a detective—he wants to turn her into a tool of war, just like the sniper rifle, the landmines, the tank, and digital technology. He wants to release the weapon that was confined in the locked room of a town detective out into the world.

If we consider that the culprit behind these incidents is, as Agent Birch said, a war criminal, and then assume that this person once revered Ms. Kyoko and now wishes for her comeback, the "deduction" that emerges from this is…

Ms. Kyoko isn't a detective, but a veteran.

A retired soldier? Her?

That title, which is even more out of place than those tacky pajamas, somehow fits the current Ms. Kyoko, who has forgotten the language of mysteries, as if it were custom-tailored haute couture.

Agent Birch had given me time to say goodbye, but standing before this Ms. Kyoko, I, who was neither a client nor able to act as a detective, couldn’t say anything at all.

"Kyoko Okitegami’s Self-propelled Artillery"—Remembered

第四話　掟上今日子の防空壕

Ch 4: Kyoko Okitegami’s Air-Raid Shelter

1

The fact that I couldn’t say anything also meant that I couldn’t say goodbye, so I decided to ignore the FBI agent’s warning and continue involving myself in the case. To think that the False Accusations King would go up against both the world's greatest law enforcement agency and a war criminal, not just a soldier—I'm in awe of my own audacity.

Well, it's only natural for a king to be audacious.

So, stubbornly sticking to my original plan of pretending to be on the run, I couldn’t return to my apartment, which was under FBI surveillance. And if the enemy is also skilled in computers and hacking, I should assume that my personal information and activity log are completely compromised. In this situation, the fact that I had (intentionally) destroyed my smartphone turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It made me feel like a top-tier chess player who could read several moves ahead.

The augmented reality trick won’t work on me. I won’t lose sight of the tank—not that I can confront one head-on, but still, give me some credit.

Where should I choose as my fake hideout?

After some deliberation, I decided to head to Okinawa Prefecture.

It's funny how my options for a long trip boil down to Okinawa or Hokkaido, a testament to my surprisingly ordinary side, but even if my personal information hadn’t been leaked, I doubt I could deceive the FBI agent or the war criminal. However, if by sheer determination, I managed to escape to a foreign country, I’d run the risk of not being able to return given the current situation. If the kind-hearted Agent Birch restricted my re-entry, I’d be in a terrible position.

When it comes to determination, I suppose I should display some island-nation resilience here.

But the idea that Ms. Kyoko might have been a retired soldier before she became a detective is such a wild hypothesis that it’s hard to believe that my decision to go to Okinawa, with its many U.S. military bases, was purely coincidental—it might have been my subconscious at work. If I hadn’t been able to book a flight to Okinawa, I likely would’ve headed to Yokosuka instead of Hokkaido.

I can hardly imagine that Ms. Kyoko used to be in the Navy SEALs or the Green Berets… and judging from the words of Agent White Birch, who apparently has no military experience, it's clear that she was never in the US military.

It’s clear—just like White Horse.

This English name, "White Horse," which even an elementary school student could translate, is just a dog tag, and it doesn’t prove that their home country is the United States—it’s even doubtful whether they’re from the English-speaking world at all, including the UK.

Still… I was impressed by how well the sailor uniform, which didn’t suit her age, looked on her when she wore it that one time (though it was just clothes), and if I think about it in terms of her being a retired soldier, it suddenly makes sense. Who would’ve thought that playful outfit was actually foreshadowing?

Anyway, I took the first flight in the morning and arrived at Naha Airport.

The temperature was different the moment I stepped off the plane.

For the time being, I planned to stay in this tropical paradise until my mind and the situation calm down… Now that I’d lost my smartphone and was freed from the convenience of online reservations, I also didn’t have the inconvenience of being tied to phone reservations, so I had no choice but to go from one reasonably priced hotel to another on foot. Fortunately, I’d been fired from my job, and I don’t have any family members who’d worry about me, so I could stay in Okinawa indefinitely if I felt like it. Unfortunately, though, my budget is limited.

Is it both fortunate and unfortunate?

Since I was supposedly on the run, I didn’t tell almost anyone where I was going, and of course, I didn’t tell Ms. Kyoko. However, just in case something happened to me (is it just in case, or is it more like ninety-nine percent certain?), I informed my reliable friend, Mr. Kondo, who works at the publishing company, just before I left the airport, telling him only that I’d "be away for a while."

This was a clear breach of confidentiality that would never happen with the Forgetful Detective, and I couldn’t even keep my own secrets, but if anyone were to file a missing person report for me, it would have to be Mr. Kondo, to whom I owe a great deal. So, I needed to keep that route secured.

I also made one small request.

It was a long shot, but the ever-capable Mr. Kondo agreed readily—now, will this foreshadowing lead to something good, something bad, or will it backfire?

It seems most likely that nothing will come of it, but that’s fine. Even if it’s a wasted effort, it’s still better than nothing. I’ll say this again: I’m not putting much stock in this foreshadowing, even less than I did with the sailor uniform.

Since it was a weekday off-season, finding a place to stay went more smoothly than expected. It’s rare for things to go this well in my life. But true to form, things went a little too smoothly, and after securing a place, there was a few-hour gap until check-in time.

Should I visit the Churaumi Aquarium?

I think they have a giant whale shark… And a dugong…no, wait, it's a manatee at Churaumi. A manatee. I’d like to see that. Even if I’m being pursued by the FBI, I should be allowed to enjoy myself a little. But when I looked into it, I found that Churaumi wasn’t particularly close to the hotel I’d booked. It would take nearly two hours by car.

The round-trip bus from the city center didn’t match up well with my schedule, so if I really wanted to go, I’d need to rent a car. I used to drive a truck for a while (before I got fired due to a false accusation), so there’s no problem with my license, but this feels a bit of a full-fledged tourist thing to do.

I can't help but feel a little guilty.

It feels like I'm trying to have as much fun as possible under the guise of a serious escape.

If possible, I should restrict my activities to places that are accessible by local bus or the Yui Rail. It might be wise to just quietly have some 'soki soba' at a restaurant catering to tourists, but then again, this isn’t a place I get to visit often, so I also want to see what there is to see.

The Shuri Castle main hall tragically burned down, but I hear the Shureimon Gate is still standing, so if I want to expand my knowledge, that might be the place to go. Just because I realized I lack the qualities of a detective doesn’t mean I should give up on learning. Even adults can become wiser.

No, wait a minute.

As for Shuri Castle, I could just donate some money now and come back to see it after it’s been restored—there’s no rush. But isn't there a place I should see now, while I still have the chance?

There’s something I need to know.

I’m fully aware that it’s not a place I should visit with half-hearted feelings, but once I made up my mind, I didn’t hesitate. I left my luggage at the hotel and immediately set off for that place.

Namely, the Himeyuri Peace Museum.

I may be somewhat educated, so I've learned about the Himeyuri Peace Museum from my Japanese history textbooks, but on the flip side, that means I only have textbook knowledge on the subject. As you might guess, this is my first time in Okinawa (although I have been to Shikoku and had dealings with the Okinawa Prefectural Police due to highly complicated circumstances), and since all my school trips through high school were to Kyoto or Nara, I'm embarrassed to admit that I didn't even know where the Himeyuri Peace Museum was in Okinawa. But even if it's farther away than the Churaumi Aquarium, I have to visit it.

Sniper rifles, landmines, tanks—along with cyber technologies like augmented reality and hacking—up until now, I've been thinking of these weapons, military technologies, and strategies primarily in the context of a mystery.

However, in contrast, Ms. Kyoko—who has lost her knowledge of mystery terms—interpreted the landmines and tanks in their original context.

Their original context.

Not as tricks, but as tactics. Not with deductions, but with strategy. Not from a criminal, but from a soldier.

I was struck speechless, left without words, but in this case, isn't it me who's misunderstanding? Wasn't it me who thought it might be a little cool to be falsely accused of being a sniper?

More than a pacifist, I've been complacent in peace.

Incorporating tools of war into the context of a mystery might be considered somewhat inappropriate—just as writing or reading about murder for entertainment could be seen as inappropriate. Is it really right to think of a sniper rifle as stylish, to consider landmines impressive, or to find beauty in a tank? When it comes to firearms and explosives, my thoughts naturally drift far away, but what about a Japanese sword? It's recognized for its value as an art piece, a work of art, and when viewed behind glass in a museum, even I can't help but be entranced by it. But that, too, is a tool designed for killing.

It's a functional beauty specialized for murder.

I'm aware of that as I admire it, but I can't claim with confidence that I know war well enough to say that I'm doing so with full understanding—nor can I simply brush it off by saying that I belong to a generation that doesn't know war.

After all, even in the quarter-century I've been alive, in the 21st century, and even since the "Reiwa era" began, I'm fully aware that war has been happening somewhere in the world at all times—though it's hard to grasp this in Japan, where there's no military draft, there are regions where sniper rifles, landmines, and tanks have become part of everyday scenery, and it's unlikely that this will change in my lifetime.

It’s not that I don’t know.

I’ve just forgotten.

No—I'm just pretending to have forgotten.

I don’t want to be shot in the head like Ms. Kyoko, but if I don’t loosen up my mystery-focused brain, I might end up confronting a war criminal without grasping the essence of the situation.

Am I not viewing White Horse, who brings out all sorts of tools of war, regardless of size, reality, or virtuality, as if they were a villain like the Fiend with Twenty Faces or Professor Moriarty from a mystery novel? With that approach, instead of getting closer to the truth, I might end up distancing myself from the true nature of the war criminal—in fact, I might be trying to escape into the world of entertainment to avoid a real confrontation.

But that’s not going to work.

Whatever conclusion I come to, I have to face war properly.

So heading to the Himeyuri Peace Museum, one of the places that most bears the scars of war on a global scale, was a very natural thing to do—it was, so to speak, an adult’s school trip. Since I didn’t have a smartphone, I asked the hotel front desk how to get there—apparently it wasn’t as far as Churaumi Aquarium, but it would be a somewhat complicated journey. I would have to take the Yui Rail, then transfer to a bus, and then transfer to another bus… there’s no direct bus like the one that goes to Churaumi.

I'll just have to grin and bear it.

The Himeyuri Peace Museum is not a tourist attraction.

Taking a taxi would’ve been much easier, but I couldn’t afford to blow my modest budget on the first day of my life on the run… Even though it’s within Japan, navigating bus transfers in an unfamiliar place is a challenge, but this was no time to be daunted by such difficulties.

I used to be the kind of person who never pushed the "Next Stop" button on the bus myself, always relying on others, and even now, I’m not the type to push it proactively—but today, I couldn’t afford to take that kind of passive stance. In the end, I made two mistakes in trying to transfer buses (for some reason, I ended up on a shuttle bus to a resort hotel), and I even managed to get on the wrong Yui Rail train (I boarded one heading in the opposite direction), but I did manage to reach my destination before sunset.

I bought flowers near the entrance and offered them at the memorial.

While waiting at the bus stop, I had thought it would be more appropriate to follow the route through the Himeyuri Peace Memorial Museum and properly learn about the Battle of Okinawa before laying flowers, but when I actually saw the Himeyuri Tower, I couldn't just pass by it.

It's not that I know nothing of the tragedy. It's not that I don't know…

Yet, as someone fully aware that my knowledge is limited to what I learned for exams, I feel intimidated when I visit places like this, not just the Himeyuri Peace Museum. I didn't come here out of mere curiosity; in fact, I came with the utmost sincerity, but now that I'm here, I can't help but feel that it might be too soon for someone like me.

Idiot.

If it's too soon now, when will the right time be?

I'm old enough to vote, or even to run for office.

Naturally, I was able to enter the museum just by paying the admission fee—I had feared running into real school trips or local field trips, but it seemed that it wasn't the season for that, so I proceeded through the museum, following the indicated route. There was still time before I could check into my hotel, and I had checked the return bus schedule when I arrived, so I had plenty of time. Since I had nothing urgent to do, I took my time looking through the exhibits, being careful not to inconvenience the other visitors.

It was obvious, but I still felt firsthand that what's written in textbooks isn't everything that happens in the world—of course, I could've gained enough knowledge just by searching the internet at home, without coming all the way to the Himeyuri Peace Museum, but as I've said repeatedly, my smartphone isn't even being repaired. I'm not sure if I can even recover the data.

If, as a result, I was able to take the time to correct my ignorant understanding, then perhaps it was worth temporarily giving up my smartphone. Being cut off from the hectic modern society might have finally allowed me to commit to this adult school trip… No, if I had successfully navigated using my smartphone, I could have arrived an hour earlier.

But in any case, at the Himeyuri Peace Museum, which I visited as if led there, I didn't encounter any real school trips or local field trips—instead, as if in replacement, I ended up meeting someone I hadn't expected to see in my refuge in Okinawa. It was in the Sixth Exhibition Hall, the Peace Plaza, where we met.

"Huh? That height… is that you, Kakushidate?"

Though I was supposedly on the run, I had disguised myself by pulling my hat down low and wearing a non-woven mask, but she recognized me by my height—this is what you call a real giveaway. The person who recognized me didn't seem to be in disguise at all—if anything, the

fact that she was wearing a ‘kariyushi’ shirt to blend in with the locals could be considered a disguise, but she wasn’t covering her hairstyle with a hat, her face with a mask, nor was she wearing sunglasses like Agent Birch.

However, in her case, just being bare-faced could be considered a disguise—because her profession is a manga artist, and she works under the male pen name "Aritsugu Satoi."

Even without a mask, she’s a masked writer.

“Ms. Satoi—”

It was an unexpected reunion.

It was so unexpected that I suspected it might have been arranged by Mr. Kondo, the only person who knew my whereabouts—Mr. Kondo, who works as an editor at the publishing company, used to be Ms. Satoi’s editor. Because of that connection, I once mediated when the Forgetful Detective solved a theft case that occurred in Ms. Satoi’s workplace—it was an extremely rare case where the False Accusations King didn’t get involved as a falsely accused client.

If not for that, Ms. Satoi probably wouldn’t have greeted me so casually—just recently, Ms. Kyoko had shown me how cold the world can be towards someone who was once suspected of being a criminal.

But I was surprised, or rather, to be honest, I was a bit taken aback… Having an early character show up out of the blue like this makes it feel like the final episode of something. Please, let this be Mr. Kondo’s doing!

“I-I haven’t seen you in a while. I’ve been following your recent successes—”

I know it sounds like something a former detective would say, but when I say I've heard about her recent success, I mean it. After that theft incident, her new series "Allegro Etiquette," which started on a web platform, reportedly surpassed ten million copies in circulation, according to an ad I saw on the train. The fact that it reached such numbers without any media mix is beyond impressive—it’s almost uncanny. But for such a popular manga artist to be on vacation in Okinawa… Could it be that she, too, is being targeted by a war criminal or the FBI?

“Or are you on break next week for author research?”

“No, I’m wrapping up that series. I’ve already finished drawing up to the final chapter. Since it sold well, that’s enough for me.”

“…”

I once heard from Mr. Kondo that all manga artists are geniuses, but among them, this particular artist seems to stand out. I couldn't come up with an appropriate response on the spot. It's like a master detective losing interest in a case once they've reached the truth.

"But you're right about the research. I'm on a research trip. I'm brainstorming ideas for my next work. You really are the assistant of a master detective."

There's a huge misunderstanding about my profession.

Well, I didn't feel like proudly revealing my title of "False Accusations King" to one of the few people who didn't know about it.

With the mention of a research trip, the possibility that this chance encounter was orchestrated by Mr. Kondo quickly disappeared… Even if it wasn't, it's unlikely that Mr. Kondo, who holds a position of authority, would send a popular manga artist, a treasure of the publishing company, to be my tour guide. It would be presumptuous to expect that kind of friendship from my former boss.

I should just be grateful she isn't on the run from a deadline.

So, whether I consider this coincidence as just a coincidence or as a meaningful one is up to me… I had been looking at the photos and reading the documents in this museum, trying to understand them with my own limited knowledge, but I wondered how these same materials would appear through the eyes of a genius.

There was also something else that worried me.

Though this manga artist, who has surpassed ten million copies in sales, isn't exactly a mystery writer, she's still made a name for herself in the entertainment world… Coming here to research the scars of war seems like a pretty heavy theme.

I came here because I felt it was inappropriate to treat tools of war as if they were on equal footing with mystery terminology, and I wanted to adjust my understanding. But is Ms. Satoi planning to shift to more socially conscious themes in her next work?

"As a successful artist, have you decided to take on the heavy responsibility of conveying the scars of war to the next generation?"

"No. My next work is going to be a light-hearted school comedy set in the near future. But whether I create something like that knowing about past tragedies or not makes a huge difference in the content."

She was more of a genius than I thought.

When we last met, it was amidst a case, so I didn't have much opportunity to delve into her artistic style… but there are intense personalities that only reveal themselves in the calm of everyday life.

The calm of everyday life…

But just as I was admiring her for that, Ms. Satoi suddenly said something that brought us crashing down: "But maybe it would have been better if I had drawn it without knowing."

"Maybe it would have been a more honest message if a clueless idiot like me had drawn it. I wanted to depict a peaceful school life where nothing bad ever happens, not even fights between friends, but now it just feels like a deception."

It's not even fiction; it's just a lie.

Ms. Satoi said this in a somber tone… Perhaps that extreme fluctuation is part of her genius, but she didn't try to hide her emotions from me, someone she just happened to run into.

The smile that had graced her face, happy to see me again, suddenly vanished.

I wonder if it's like when someone sets out to create a cool new manga about the Shinsengumi, but then learns about their atrocities and the grim reality of that era, making it impossible to write with the same enthusiasm. Or perhaps, in this case, it's more accurate to compare it to the dilemma of a delinquent manga inciting admiration for delinquency, or a light-hearted rom-com being halted when the creator learns about the realities of sexual violence—like a mystery writer grappling with whether they could continue writing detective stories after their young grandchild was brutally murdered.

"You know, my first big hit was about war."

Even the powerful words "first big hit" sounds feeble here.

"Though it was a fantasy in another world, with spirits and monsters fighting against humans. It was something I wrote when I was young, in my teens, so the characters were fearless and bravely fought each other. And, of course, it was popular. There were times when it ranked number one in surveys, like when the protagonist's country annihilated an enemy nation they had been at war with for a thousand years. But when you think about it, they wiped out an entire country. I say 'when you think about it,' but back then, I didn't even consider how many lives were lost in the shadow of the protagonists' heroics."

"Well… but don't the readers distinguish between reality and fiction? Isn't that what manga is?"

"Do they? Is that really what manga is? When I was drawing it, I wasn't thinking of it as fiction. While I was creating it, the manga was more real to me."

I'm neither a creator nor an entertainer, so I couldn't possibly discuss things on the same level as Ms. Satoi, but now that I think about it, I had a similar conversation with another manga artist during a different case… about whether an author is responsible if a reader commits a crime or suicide because of their work.

But as I was recalling that, Ms. Satoi said something on a completely different scale:

"If that's the case, then maybe a war could start because of a manga I haphazardly created. I might depict a massive genocide because I thought it would look cool. I might draw an invasion war because I thought it would be exciting. Even if I didn't intend to be careless, it doesn't change the fact that my research was sloppy."

I couldn't just laugh it off.

A cumulative total of ten million copies for a single work—frankly, that means she has the power to influence readers and the public. If someone like that speaks positively about war, rightly or wrongly, that message might actually get through.

And it could be delivered in an entertaining way.

Looking at it that way, freedom of expression comes with responsibility. It's not free from responsibility.

Though the nature of her concerns differs from my own about the compatibility of mysteries and weapons, we're still in the same category. Unintentionally, I had found a commonality between the False Accusations King and a genius, but there's no time to be pleased about it—I need to dig a little deeper.

"It's because of that experience that you came here to research for your next work, right, Ms. Satoi? But there's no way it's better to create something without knowing… There's no such thing as bad knowledge, is there?"

"As I've gotten older and gained more experience, I've found that I can't create the way I did when I was younger. When I was young, ignorant, and reckless, I could draw freely without worrying about anything. I didn't even think about doing research. Being sloppy was a virtue. But I started to hate my own carefree attitude, and I thought I should do proper research for the next one, but now I hate it even more. The more I learn, the more I feel like I shouldn't be drawing manga at all."

I caught my breath.

Things were taking a turn different from the resolve I had just made.

Ah, if that’s how she’s feeling, then indeed, she’s not yet ready to pass anything down to the next generation. Before entering the museum, I had felt that maybe it was too soon for me, but perhaps it was actually too soon for her.

It's like saying you want to pass on the horrors of war to children, but if you expose them directly to the unfiltered reality of war damage, it will only traumatize them and have the opposite effect.

All I wanted was to hear the opinion of a genius, but now it’s turning into a conversation about whether a hitmaker should quit the pen… This isn’t something I can keep to myself.

How am I supposed to explain this to Mr. Kondo, who has been so good to me?

It's partly my fault for steering the conversation in this direction by butting in—because she happened to run into me, she ended up voicing the worries that had been brewing in her genius mind. Voicing thoughts that she probably shouldn’t have.

“P-Please, calm down, Ms. Satoi. You, of all people, shouldn’t be saying things like you ‘shouldn't be drawing manga.’ And besides, do you have any idea how many people’s livelihoods depend on your work?”

"But anyone can be successful. If I don't make it, someone else will."

I could argue with that, but I’ll let it pass. I’m not in the same industry.

Though I’m not in the same industry, and even though I’m unemployed and it might not be convincing, I continued on as if I were one of the people who made a living off Ms. Satoi’s work.

“Didn’t you just say it yourself? That a manga could start a war—well, then, a manga could just as easily stop a war, couldn’t it?”

"That’s not going to happen."

She's strangely realistic at times.

Please, think a little more highly of yourself.

Of course, I didn’t really believe it either when I said it… but she isn’t someone who can be convinced with rhetoric. Besides, in Ms. Satoi’s case, she probably doesn’t truly want to create a work that openly advocates against war.

"Yeah. Not many people know this, but I once tried to write something preachy like that, and it got canceled."

Even a genius can get canceled… No wonder it’s not well-known.

I could only respond with, "I see."

Because of my preference for master detectives, I often dismiss social commentary mysteries as a subgenre, but in any case, turning social issues into entertainment requires a completely different set of muscles than coming up with tricks or mysterious villains.

"You could say it got canceled because I tried to preach about something I didn't really understand, just pretending I knew what I was talking about based on my impressions. But if I had known more, it might've been canceled even faster. It would have gone beyond preachy and become all apologetic. 'This has no connection to real events or organizations,' 'This was done under the guidance of experts,' 'These are personal opinions.' It's like the knowledge I gained was just an alibi, an attempt to justify including those excuses. Besides, doesn't mixing social issues into entertainment feels like trying to trick kids into studying?"

"Ah… Like chopping up vegetables and mixing them into a hamburger? But if it helps them learn…"

"It's the same as wartime education. 'Become a fine soldier,' they'd tell the children. No, maybe modern education is fundamentally the same too—no matter what I write next, if a war breaks out, children will be mobilized. Essentially, war is about deceiving children who don't know any better and sending them to the battlefield, isn't it?"

Is this what the world looks like through the eyes of a genius?

In that regard, it wasn't necessarily too soon for her. In fact, she understands it much more directly than I do.

"They convert a naturally occurring cave into an air-raid shelter and a field hospital, and then they have the audacity to issue a demobilization order. I've been rambling on about the mistakes of the past, but what I'm trying to do is probably the same. I can spoil readers with a heartwarming school story, but eventually, those ten million people who read it will realize that I'm just a liar. They'll realize I made millions off lies."

Making millions off lies, huh.

The scale of things is always so large with someone who's successful.

"So maybe it's time to just give up on manga altogether. I don't have to struggle with guilty feelings while working on my next project. I could just retire early and live modestly. I have enough disposable income to live on for the rest of my life—the real estate I bought with my deceitful earnings."

Why is it that every manga artist decides to retire in front of me… Think! How did Ms. Kyoko convince Mr. Fumoto to retract his retirement declaration? Oh right, she provoked (?) him by saying, ‘Your manga isn’t that interesting, so it won’t have any impact on readers’… Could I say that? Ms. Satoi is a person of immense influence, no matter who reads her work. If you count her total sales, it’s far more than ten million copies.

She’s aware of that herself, which is why she’s so conflicted… but I know this isn’t something I can really comment on as someone who’s never stuck to any one job. What could someone like me, who doesn’t even have a purpose in life, possibly say to someone who’s actually achieved something?

Some might say that when someone talks about wanting to quit their job or finding no meaning in their work, it’s something everyone says at least once, and you shouldn’t take it too seriously. But that’s not much different from dismissing the horrors of war depicted in manga as fiction and claiming there's no need to take them seriously.

I don’t think we should dismiss the feelings of Ms. Satoi, who seems unable to fully cope with the burdens of humanity that she doesn’t want to face—no, it’s me who can’t cope with them. Ms. Satoi is confronting them head-on. I’m just the insensitive fool who barged into such a scene. It’s absurd for this ordinary person to try to empathize with a genius—but how about this?

Saying you’ve decided to quit being a manga artist because you were moved by the sorrow you felt at the Himeyuri Peace Museum… that doesn’t feel quite right, does it? This is not a place to stop learning. Yes, war is tragic, and the world is unstable, but banning all things fun or entertaining because of that would create an unbearable dystopia, wouldn’t it?

War exists. Even without war, there's oppression.

That’s true.

It’s something we must not forget.

But surely, the purpose of teaching today's children about the horrors of past wars isn't to make them live in perpetual misery. It's so they can appreciate how precious and fortunate it is to live in a time when they can enjoy manga and mystery novels without a second thought—it's unacceptable for someone to voluntarily give that up. Even if you’re a writer with a total of ten million copies sold, you don’t have that right. For someone to cease their creative activities because of war is mirroring exactly what happens during wartime. I refuse to even entertain the thought of Edogawa Rampo's novels being censored again. I refuse to accept an era without Sherlock Holmes.

Entertainment isn’t weaker than war.

It’s not.

Does entertainment make people worse? Don’t be ridiculous. War is what makes people worse—if that’s the case, then it’s right to turn sniper rifles, landmines, and tanks into tools of mystery.

Let's play around with weapons.

So if you really want to put down your pen—if you want to step away from this era, use another reason, like your talent running out, losing motivation after making millions, or crumbling under the pressure.

It wouldn’t be fair to blame it on meeting me—please spare me such false accusations.

"Understood. It doesn’t seem like you’re saying this on a whim, so I’ll inform Mr. Kondo on your behalf. I imagine it would be hard for you to say it yourself."

"Huh?"

"I’m genuinely impressed by your sensitivity, Ms. Satoi. However, this is a personal request from me, but could you take that same sensitivity and visit the Churaumi Aquarium with me? If possible, right now."

"You’ll inform Mr. Kondo? I mean—the Churaumi Aquarium? Why?"

"I thought that if you take that same sensitivity and observe the life force of the mother sea in Okinawa, it might reignite your creative passion. And while the Kariyushi look suits you, how about changing into an Uminchu T-shirt from a nearby shop? This island is also a fishing town, you know."

3

That night, instead of quietly staying at an affordable hotel in Okinawa as I had planned, I found myself canceling that reservation and standing on the site of the Okitegami Building, which had been reduced to a burned-out wasteland on Honshu island.

Why?

Let me explain.

Of course, the sea in Okinawa isn’t just the clear blue ocean that tourists vaguely imagine, and there was a possibility that Ms. Satoi could have sympathized with the microplastics issue, making my suggestion as shallow as the shoreline. However, it wouldn’t have been right to come all the way to Okinawa and only learn about the dark side before leaving. It’s a childish

philosophy to conclude that humans are dirty, that humans are the root of all evil, and that they are the cancer of the Earth. It's not a healthy way to live. If after seeing both light and shadow, she still comes to the same conclusion, then I have no business interfering—although, for someone who's supposed to be a mature adult, it's hard to say that Ms. Satoi has fully established her sense of self. But then again, there's no place for me in her life anyway. However, the flow of conversation is a terrifying thing, because after that, I ended up going on a date with a bestselling author of ten million copies at Churaumi Aquarium. Not only that, but we had a blast scuba diving until the sun set and even tried flyboarding. Of course, we also ate some "soki soba". Ms. Satoi also indulged in plenty of Awamori. I hadn't known this, but apparently, people in Okinawa don't eat as much fish as you'd expect.

I must admit, considering how Mr. Kondo would probably give me some extra cash for my excellent hospitality, it was a pretty good effort. However, knowing that the entire budget, including the taxi fare, was coming out of Ms. Satoi's pocket, I couldn't complain—in fact, I should be thanking her profusely.

And that's not just because I got to see manatees at Churaumi. While I had almost completely forgotten about it in the face of a potential loss to the publishing world, I found a hint in my conversation with Ms. Satoi.

If I were to say it once more in the style of the Forgetful Detective:

'What did you just say…?'

"They convert a naturally occurring cave into an air-raid shelter and a field hospital…"

An air-raid shelter.

There was a diorama of that at the Himeyuri Peace Museum too.

In Switzerland, which is a permanently neutral country, every household was once equipped with a nuclear shelter—after parting ways with Ms. Satoi after dinner, those words stuck with me more than ever.

Indeed, the Okitegami Building was certainly bombarded and collapsed without leaving a single pillar standing—it might be that the location where the tank appeared and where it fled to were skillfully disguised with augmented reality, but the bombardment itself did actually happen; you could say it was real reality.

I had also confirmed that wreckage with my own eyes.

But had I, in my peaceful ignorance, not overestimated the bombardment by a tank, a symbol of the extraordinary? It wasn't so much an overestimation as it was an inflated image. In its own way, that was a preconception.

No matter how robust the Okitegami Building was, it wouldn't stand a chance against an attack by a tank—no matter how advanced the security, it wouldn't be designed to withstand such a large-scale, physical invasion.

That's what I thought, but wait a minute, is that really true?

For an ordinary detective agency, sure, that might be the case. Whether it's a detective agency or a master detective agency, yes, that's probably true—but Kyoko Okitegami is a Forgetful Detective, more than just a detective, even more than a master detective. She's a master of exhaustive reasoning, where she tests countless hypotheses, even at the cost of lowering the accuracy of each individual one—would she completely disregard the unrealistic possibility of a "detective agency being attacked by a tank"?

She might even consider the possibility of a meteorite falling.

So, even if it weren't specifically a tank, it's not unreasonable to think that she would at least have some concern that a disaster like an earthquake or typhoon might cause catastrophic damage to the building.

True, the building itself is gone without a trace. Its shadow and form have vanished, reduced to ashes—the writing on the bedroom ceiling, which was supposedly written by an FBI agent, is also gone. The one immovable object in relation to Kyoko Okitegami, whose connections reset every day, was the real estate, which has now been wiped out as if it were evidence.

But that's only talking about what was above ground.

A three-story building.

It's not entirely far-fetched to deduce that beneath the land, which has been cleared to the ground, there could be a sturdy underground room that would remain unscathed by any kind of extraordinary natural disaster—or even a war.

As a regular client, I've visited the Okitegami Building numerous times, and I've even stayed there for five days straight, but I don't know of any such underground room—however, just because I don't know about it doesn't mean I can conclude that it doesn't exist.

After all, she's the Forgetful Detective.

A master detective who strictly adheres to confidentiality.

It would be more unnatural if she didn't have a secret room that she wouldn't even reveal to a mere client like me—maybe when she insisted that I not enter her bedroom, that was actually a deliberate misdirection?

In fact, it’s not just in Switzerland—such underground shelters, designed for war or disaster, aren’t uncommon overseas. They’re even sold domestically. Small rooms equipped with infrastructure like food, drinking water, medicine, clothing, generators, showers, and radios, prepared for a few years of living—and depending on the country, they’re fortified with firearms, turning them into real fortresses. They’re built to survive not just tank attacks, but even a zombie apocalypse—so if the Okitegami Building did have such an underground shelter, what would Ms. Kyoko hide there?

What kind of evidence, too important to be destroyed, would she conceal?

I don’t know. I can’t even begin to imagine.

But whatever it is, it’s undoubtedly some kind of record—perhaps something even more important than the memo on her left arm, which is no longer useful.

The ultimate backup.

Something that could restore and reinstall all the mystery terms Ms. Kyoko has forgotten, like data from a broken smartphone—if that’s the case, then I don’t have time to be frolicking on a flyboard in the sea off Okinawa. Not that there’s ever a time in my life when I should be playing around on a flyboard, but unfortunately, I had to cut my life on the run short.

What was supposed to be an exile turned into a day trip—and by catching the last flight, I somehow managed to arrive at the site of the former Okitegami Detective Agency before the day ended.

It’s midnight now, and wearing this Uminchu T-shirt feels chilly. What a difference in temperature.

But right now, I'm too impatient to even bother with a jacket. Though I called it a burned-out wasteland, in reality, the burnt remains of building materials, furniture, and scattered debris of reinforced concrete are all over the place, so when I calm down and think about it, searching for the entrance to a basement that may or may not exist seems like it’s going to be quite a task.

This is exactly when I’d want a backhoe, but I can't ask for anyone's help.

If this secret (assuming it exists) were to be discovered by White Horse, they would undoubtedly come to destroy the air-raid shelter, along with whatever backup it contains—I must conduct the search alone, without relying on anyone.

The only man I could have depended on, Mr. Kondo, is someone I can no longer ask for help after having gone on a fun date with Ms. Satoi. Damn it, I’m getting more and more isolated. At this rate, won’t I end up disappearing too?

That being said, I do have some criteria for the search.

The collapse of the Okitegami Detective Agency is a clear act of destruction and, of course, a criminal case, so the scene must have been investigated by not only the fire department but also the police—it's safe to assume they didn't find anything.

Finding a door that has evaded a professional investigation seems like an impossible task, but in this case, the professionals weren't searching the site expecting to find such a door… There might have been some adventurous officers looking for a hidden room, but it's much more likely that their priority was to find the missing tank.

Moreover, since Ms. Kyoko, the owner, is hospitalized, it's equally safe to assume that no one has recklessly moved or disposed of the debris, whether it's building materials or waste—if the door hasn't been found yet, then it must be buried under the rubble?

And if there's any advantage that an amateur like me might have, it's that I'm a regular customer of the Okitegami Detective Agency.

As I mentioned earlier, this regular customer has never been shown the underground shelter. But I do know all the other rooms, including the bedroom with the writing on the ceiling—the kitchen, the bathroom, the toilet, the storage room, the reception room, and the walk-in closet.

I don't think that building, in its heyday, was compliant with building codes (just like the "mansions" that appear in many mystery novels), but even so, there are minimum layout requirements that must be adhered to when constructing a building.

Otherwise, the structure wouldn't be able to maintain its integrity.

Even without an earthquake, just living normally could cause the building to tilt, and in the worst case, it would collapse without needing to be shot by a tank—the Forgetful Detective, who prioritizes security above all else, wouldn't allow such a shoddy, illegal construction.

Even if it were illegally built, it wouldn't be a defective building.

And this is where my work experience comes in handy.

The whole thing started because I was falsely accused while working on such high-rise floors, but I've worked on construction sites—of course, I wasn't drafting blueprints as an architect, but I did work long enough to pick up some basic knowledge, at least until I got fired.

If you were to install a shelter directly underneath a heavy building, where would you center it, and where would you place the hatch that serves as its entrance? You'd have to consider the

foundation, pillars, and piping—and of course, you'd want to conceal it so that it wouldn't be easily found during normal times.

Hidden well is an understatement.

Maybe the fact that the upper part of the building has completely vanished will make it easier to search for the underground entrance... I'll reconstruct the Okitegami Building in my own augmented reality. I'll prove that even without a smartphone or scanning codes, I can still visualize the entire layout of the former office.

A peaceful application of technology.

Since I'm not the kind of person who repeats the same mistakes, I make sure to watch my step during the search. Frankly speaking, the possibility that White Horse has set up landmines once again in these burnt ruins, anticipating that I would come here for an investigation, is higher than the possibility that there's an underground shelter. If I count in the style of an FBI agent, this search marks the fifth time my life has been in danger.

It's a choice between finding the air-raid shelter or me getting blown to bits—or, in a more realistic scenario, I might be arrested on the spot by the local police, who would mistake me for a looter at the crime scene.

In any case, there's no peaceful future awaiting me.

What I'd prefer, of course, is to find a hidden door, but that kind of discovery might be even scarier than landmines or the local police—because I'm about to intrude on Ms. Kyoko's most deeply buried secret, literally, without her permission.

4

I found the hidden door with disconcerting ease. It was so easy that I started to doubt whether it was truly a hidden door at all. It wasn't even that buried, and there were no landmines planted—if anything, this seems like just a regular basement, not an underground shelter.

True, it was a sturdy-looking iron door that felt thick and heavy, and it didn't seem like it could be lifted easily. But it also appeared that it wasn't locked—well, even if it were a shelter, the door wouldn't be locked. If it were, it wouldn't be much of a shelter. You have to keep it unlocked so you can dive in immediately when the time comes. If you were to lock it, it would be from the inside.

Using a nearby piece of rebar and the principle of a lever, I somehow managed to lift the door—and as luck would have it, a ladder extended down into the deep underground.

The bottom was nowhere in sight.

Normally, descending into such an unknown space without proper preparation would be sheer stupidity. But this situation isn't normal, and besides, I'm no master detective, just a fool, so I descend the ladder without proper preparation.

Naturally, as I descend, I make sure to close the door properly. It's not a matter of manners; leaving it open would expose the existence of the secret underground shelter to the neighbors—it would be like raising a flag. However, the nuclear shelter was incredibly airtight. Even without locking it, the moment I closed the door, it became pitch black.

Maybe I should have left it open a crack to let a sliver of light through… Well, it's the middle of the night anyway, so any light would be nothing more than a psychological comfort. At this point, the pain of losing my smartphone, AR or not, really sinks in… for the umpteenth time. Even without using the flashlight function, just the screen lighting up would've been as effective as a torch in this cave-like treasure hunt.

Ah, if only I were a smoker, I would have a lighter or matches… I think this to myself with a nostalgic memory of the first case as I continue to descend the ladder by feel. If I'd been tied to a safety rope, it would've surely served as a lifeline.

According to what I learned from Ms. Satoi's data research, in Okinawa, horizontal caves are called "gama," and vertical caves are called "abu"… However, this vertical shaft, which is reinforced with metal on all sides, is clearly man-made. It's not a facility that uses a natural underground cavity. It felt like it took as long as it would to reach the Earth's core—it is a nuclear shelter, after all—but of course, that's impossible, and my feet finally reached the bottom.

Saying "the bottom of the Earth" is an exaggeration, but still, if I had misjudged the distance and jumped down from above, I would've certainly died. It's that kind of height, or rather, depth. You could say that a subterranean floor was more a fitting place for me to meet my end rather than a high floor where even a smartphone would surely break, but... I managed to avoid that demise.

Even though my feet are on the ground, the feeling of unease is stronger than when I was in mid-air… It's not just because I'm in pitch darkness, where I can't see an inch ahead, but because I have no idea what kind of space I'm in.

Calm down.

No matter what kind of space it is, it must be a living space.

If this is a shelter where one can live as comfortably as possible for an extended period during an emergency, then it must have electricity. In that case, there should be a switch for ceiling lights or something similar on the wall right next to where the ladder ends.

I struggled much more to find this switch in the dark than I did to find the hidden door, using all my senses, until my fingertips finally located what felt like a switch… Without carefully determining whether it was a switch for the ceiling light or a self-destruct button, I pressed it.

Fortunately, it was the former.

I don't think the LED lights embedded in the ceiling were that powerful in terms of lumens, but the sudden brightness made me squint as if I'd been hit by a stun grenade… Despite the glare, I could at least make out that this space was a room larger than I had expected.

And in the center of that room.

There was a corpse, dressed in tattered clothing, lying face-down—A corpse!?

"W-Whoa!"

It was a completely enclosed space, so my voice echoed endlessly—could it be that there was a corpse hidden directly under the detective agency?

A sudden locked-room murder case!?

No way—could it be that Ms. Kyoko was hiding a corpse? Not a backup memo, not an old diary, not memoirs, not even case investigation files—but this was Ms. Kyoko's secret?

Had she buried a body underground?

To think that this unspeakable secret was hidden in the very depths of the detective agency I frequented as a regular client—could it be that I had my false accusations cleared while standing above a corpse?

How long has this been here—was this corpse already here when I first visited the agency? Or could it be that the sturdy building was constructed to hide the body? My eyes slowly adjusted, but my heart still pounded… I was seized by the urge to run away from this space immediately. To throw everything away, flee abroad, and never come back if necessary.

There were two main reasons I didn't run away.

One, even though I did turn to flee, a reaction not usually included in my daily routine, I slipped when I tried to hastily grab the rungs of the ladder and climb up to the surface—a nearly two-meter-tall body isn't as nimble as I'd like to think.

And the other reason.

"Huh…?"

The corpse in tattered clothing seemed to move slightly.

It might have been an illusion, caused by my still unsteady vision interpreting the vibrations from when I landed on my butt… But no matter how heavy I am, I don't weigh enough to shake a nuclear shelter.

It moved?

Could it be… that it's still alive?

Impossible.

Even though it's impossible, I crawled over to the potentially dying corpse—a mysterious figure who had been hidden from the world, kept alive but not allowed to die, locked away in this underground dungeon for years, straight out of a classic mystery. But as I drew near, I realized that it was indeed impossible.

For two reasons, again.

First, the face-down figure that might have been dying wasn't a corpse at all—and second, the thing that wasn't a corpse didn't even wear tattered clothing. Even though my eyes were dazzled by the light, it's absurd that I didn't realize this until I got so close. My stupidity made me feel dizzy.

A ghillie suit.

A variation of camouflage pattern that blends into the scenery like a chameleon when lurking in the jungle, especially effective for concealment. Yes, the military uniform favored by snipers—

"W... White Horse…!"

I barely managed to call out the name, but that was as far as my consciousness lasted. The ghillie suit that had been face-down flipped over in an instant, grabbed the chest of my Uminchu T-shirt, and swept me up in a high-speed takedown, like a scythe cutting through wheat.

It was clearly a military hand-to-hand combat technique.

第五話　掟上今日子の徴兵制

Ch 5: Kyoko Okitegami’s Conscription

1

It was careless of me—how many times have I used this word in my life? I don’t know, but it was careless of me. I might as well make it my last name: Yakusuke Careless.

Why was I able to discover the hidden door so easily, without much effort? And why, despite the circumstances, wasn't it locked? I should have thought more deeply about these questions—perhaps not to the depths of the earth, but at least to the depth of a pitfall. The reason the door wasn’t buried much under the rubble wasn’t because of my good luck, but perhaps because someone had already found that hidden door before me, someone who put in the effort I didn’t. And the reason it was unlocked might not have been just so it could be quickly accessed in an emergency—maybe someone had already unlocked that sturdy door before I arrived.

Did I think I was the only one in the world who knew about it?

I hadn't covered all the bases.

It’s the same logic as how Ms. Kyoko, who was no longer a detective, could climb up to that high floor without security, simply because I, who held the key card, had already disabled the security system. Moreover, the idea that I was the only one who had discovered the Copernican revelation of a secret underground shelter in the Okitegami Building was the height of carelessness—anyone could have noticed it, just as I did. And besides, there was always the possibility that someone blew up the entire building to remove the inconvenient structure above, just to sneak into that underground shelter.

It wasn't impossible to predict that the reason why there were no dangerous landmines planted in the burned-out field was because the culprit was here. Where did the culprit, who vanished along with the tank, go? Setting up a base of operations at the site of the building they destroyed to plan their next crime is a complete blind spot, and at the same time, now that it’s been pointed out, it’s obvious—once again, the sniper literally followed the principle that “the criminal returns to the scene of the crime.”

They even respected the conventions of mystery, didn’t they?

They’re mercilessly exploiting Ms. Kyoko’s current blind spot.

Come to think of it, natural caves in Okinawa were not only converted into air-raid shelters or hospitals, but were also used as military bases on the front lines… In extreme terms, when I made the discovery, instead of being so nonchalant, I could have just simply sat on top of that

iron door, or even piled the rubble back on top of it—and I might have been able to capture the culprit.

The soldier. The war criminal.

White Horse, who was once a member of Ms. Kyoko's fan club.

But instead, without imagining that someone else might already be there, I naively searched for the light switch, simply because I was afraid of the dark—without realizing that not just one step ahead, but the entire surrounding area, was pitch black. During that time, the enemy had the presence of mind to immediately lie down and pretend to be a corpse, playing dead for the unexpected intruder.

They used my mystery-loving brain against me, staging a locked-room murder in the underground dungeon—by doing so, they robbed me of my calm reasoning (if I even had such a thing), making me think, "Oh, I know how this goes; I've read about this before," and luring me into a range where they could grab me by the collar.

So, in this hand-to-hand combat that took place underground, was I finished off? Or did the soldier refrain from killing a civilian?

My fate will be revealed three lines down.

2

The moment I regained consciousness, I thought it was a dream.

But this wasn't one of those infamous mystery novel twists where it turns out that everything—the Kyoko Okitegami murder case that started with the sniper attack on the executive, the landmines set on the high floors of the construction site, the destruction of the detective agency by a tank, and the unexpected discovery of a nuclear shelter leading to my encounter with the hitmaker—was just a dream. No, I had experienced the reality of all that, along with the accompanying pain, to the point where it was unbearable.

Rather, it was after waking up that I thought I might be dreaming—any fan of detective novels, not just a dreamer like myself, would have felt the same way.

This was that kind of space.

A dreamlike scene beyond imagination.

My eyes hadn't yet fully adjusted to the harsh ceiling lights after emerging from the darkness, and being the "first witness" to the "strange corpse" had distracted me from paying attention to my surroundings—I had only grasped that the basement was surprisingly spacious—but now

the truth was brought to light: this space was not just a shelter from disasters, not merely an air-raid shelter anticipating war, but also a “library” that any mystery enthusiast would drool over.

Well, "brought to light" not by daylight, but LED light.

The walls around the room were lined with bookshelves embedded into them, reaching up to the high ceiling, probably to prevent them from toppling over in the event of a natural or man-made disaster—they were the kind of solid, impressive bookshelves with ladders that everyone dreams of, and behind the glass doors, all the books were detective novels.

Detective novels from all times and places, an overwhelming collection that would take your breath away—by “all times and places,” I don’t mean just from the different regions in Japan, but literally mysteries from all over the world. The spines of the books, not only in Japanese but in various languages, colored the walls of the shelter like a rainbow.

I’ve heard rumors that the National Diet Library, in order to manage its collection, controls temperature and humidity perfectly and, in the event of a fire, rather than relying on sprinklers, it suppresses the fire by reducing oxygen levels, like an international art museum—could it be that this is a shelter, but one designed to preserve a massive collection of books?

However, this library—no, this Okitegami Library—doesn’t seem to be in great condition when it comes to the preservation of the countless detective novels stored here. Just by looking at the spines, you can tell that every book has been read to the point of being tattered.

As if someone had read them a hundred times, instead of "revisiting the crime scene a hundred times" (as we say in Japan).

Even the rare and valuable first editions scattered here and there, books that would make you rub your eyes in disbelief, would probably be bought for a pittance if you brought them to a secondhand bookstore—these rare books are shelved next to obscure and niche foreign detective novels that only someone like me, who used to work in a secondhand bookstore, would recognize as detective novels. The collection doesn’t give off the impression of a carefully curated private collection.

It’s not for selling or showing off.

It’s a collection for reading.

And not just reading once, but over and over again, repeatedly, endlessly—a collection meant to be read again and again with fresh eyes, just like the Forgetful Detective, who resets her memory every day.

Even if a natural disaster or war were to happen, if she were holed up in this Okitegami Library, she’d never run out of books to read for the rest of her life. Even if the world were to end, even if

she were the last person on Earth, she could keep reading detective novels. What was hidden deep beneath the detective agency wasn't a backup record, a miser's hoard of gold bars, a fashion leader's closet, or even a strange corpse locked in a room—it was bookshelves.

As I turned my head to search, I found the hundred works by mystery writer Hirubei Sunaga, which Ms. Kyoko had once received as payment for solving a case—they were safely stored on one of the shelves. I had thought they were lost in the tank's bombardment, but it seems they had been evacuated to this shelter beforehand.

I had worried for nothing—not just worried, but overthought things. Of course, Ms. Kyoko had anticipated the complete destruction of the Okitegami Building with her signature exhaustive reasoning.

Then perhaps, even the sniper attack—

"—I envy you."

As the self-proclaimed False Accusations King, who has had countless wrongful accusations cleared by famous detectives, I couldn't help it, but still in a dreamy state, my attention was drawn only to the bookshelves embedded in the walls. Then I heard that voice and turned my gaze to the center of the room.

And I was shocked.

"M—Ms. Kyoko!?"

No. That's not right.

There's a saying about not seeing the forest for the trees, but this person, dressed in a ghillie suit that seemed like a forest itself, had camo paint on their cheeks, forehead, and around their eyes. Their face was exactly like that of the Kyoko Okitegami I knew, but this "she" couldn't possibly be Kyoko Okitegami.

Not because she wasn't wearing glasses, or because her hair, grown out to blend with the ghillie suit, was a bright green, or because the Ms. Kyoko who was hospitalized should have a gauze patch over the wound on her forehead—those weren't the reasons.

Glasses can be taken off, and she could wear a wig as part of a total disguise—gauze that isn't sewn on can easily be peeled off. The ghillie suit might be a bizarre fashion choice, but compared to those tacky pajamas, it's almost chic. Even the sniper rifle cradled at her chest could be considered a bold fashion accessory.

But that's not it.

It’s because “she” was sitting on a stack of thick detective novels, which seemed to have been pulled from the bookshelf—Ms. Kyoko, who isn’t an armchair detective, would never sit on books.

“W-Who are you?”

“White Horse. Didn’t you know? False Accusations King.”

The way she spoke was rough and masculine, but her tone and intonation were exactly the same as Ms. Kyoko’s. However, “she” boldly identified herself—as White Horse.

In other words, she wasn’t disguised as Ms. Kyoko to deceive me… It wasn’t a mask like that one masked writer, nor a disguise like the ghillie suit, and no matter how much paint was on her, this was White Horse’s true face.

“A… twin?”

Could it be, a “twin trick”? In this day and age?

Kidnapped twin siblings—forget the False Accusations King, this is more like something out of "The Count of Monte Cristo"—but no, what am I talking about? This soldier hasn’t been kidnapped. In that sense, she’s no different from me, an illegal intruder.

“Not even close. We’re complete strangers. Or maybe only 'white' brings us together. You could say we’re doppelgängers. That’s why I was hired to be Mam’s body double—until Mam retired. I was literally bought while imprisoned as a war criminal. How much was it back then, in Japanese yen? About three hundred yen, I think.”

“…”

Mam… In the military, wasn’t that what they called female commanders? Not "Sir," but "Ma'am" or sometimes "Mam"… Who is this Mam?

I don't want to think about it, and I don't have to.

“It’s not just because I’m a soldier that I call her Mam. We were family. We are family. That’s why I call her Mam.”

That part made it sound even more like an English-speaking country… But, surprisingly, she looked Asian, just like Ms. Kyoko—A body double…? The words “Mam” and “family” feel out of place when I think about Ms. Kyoko—they don’t match her solitary, almost isolated image at all.

Even when she was shot in the head and hospitalized, there were no relatives to contact—that’s the image one has of Ms. Kyoko.

But then there's the military ID.

You could say I've watched too many war dramas, but the so-called dog tags typically come in pairs—The two dog tags have the same information, and if a soldier dies in battle, one tag is left with the body, while the other is taken back by a comrade. The tag brought back serves as a memento, delivered to the next of kin. The other is left with the body… so that even if the body is damaged… yes, even if it decays, it can still be identified apart from other bodies.

One tag remains on the battlefield, the other returns home.

Kyoko Okitegami's—license plates.

"After Mam retired, I became the new Mam. I became a double without a body—like how Mam became a detective. By the way, it would be great if you could attack me by surprise."

Suddenly hearing that, I realized belatedly that I wasn't tied up with my hands behind my back, nor was I gagged, nor was I even injured—not even a scratch. Maybe there was a bruise on my neck from being choked with her leg, but in any case, I wasn't restrained.

I wasn't bound in any way.

I was just lying carelessly on what seemed to be a reading stand in this library—it was an unthinkable level of hospitality for a prisoner.

"If you'd rather try to escape, that's fine too. That would give me an excuse to shoot you—see, I missed my chance to kill you earlier by mistake."

It didn't seem like hospitality after all.

The sniper rifle she cradles is, of course, a long-range firearm, but that doesn't mean it can't be used at close range. Bigger guns can handle smaller tasks, and long-range covers short-range.

What is this? Is White Horse forbidding herself from mistreating prisoners? Even though she's a war criminal?

"I was a war criminal until Mam bought me for three hundred yen. You, False Accusations King, should understand that, right? If a law says you're guilty, then you're guilty. The law I was convicted under is the law of a country that no longer exists, but… Don't ask about it. I'm the kind of guy who'll answer anything. This time, it's me who wants to do the questioning."

She says whatever she wants, with that masculine tone of hers.

Being accused like that with Ms. Kyoko's face, I'd probably confess everything, even without being subjected to the torture banned by the Geneva Conventions—her sniper-focused fashion makes her look less like a body double and more like Ms. Kyoko's 2P character.

Interrogation.

It's hard to deny that I'm alive not because she's keeping me alive for questioning, but because I just happened to survive… I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd been strangled to death in a grappling hold.

"If it's something I can answer, I'll tell you anything."

"Well, that's no fun."

"But before that… could you please stop sitting on the books?"

I didn't say, "looking like that."

"Oh, these? I tried reading about twenty of them while waiting for you to wake up, but I didn't get it. Why make such a big deal over one or two, or even ten people being killed? It's not mysterious at all."

White Horse didn't move from her position, sitting with her legs spread apart. But her words didn't seem like provocation or criticism—they were simply expressing genuine curiosity and doubt.

"I was even thinking of tearing out the pages and folding a thousand paper cranes. That's how you pay your respects in this country, right? That's about all they're good for."

A thousand cranes made from detective novels, huh?

Ripping out pages is sacrilegious, but the idea is kind of stylish—in contrast to the typical image of a sniper in fiction, she doesn't seem entirely lacking in humor.

"For your memorial."

That's not funny.

But even though I don't think I was unconscious for that long, she managed to read enough books to sit on, even if she speed-read them—not just her appearance, but her abilities could be said to be just like Ms. Kyoko's.

Is that why she's a body double? It's not just the outside that's similar... but the inside as well.

“A master detective… huh. Is this what Mam wanted to be? I don’t get it. She abandoned the family, dumped everything on me, ignored world peace, and this is the cheap hero she wanted to be?”

“...I’ve been saved many times. By Ms. Kyoko, in desperate situations.”

“I’d like to hear more about that, False Accusations King. About Mam’s current—daily activities, and how meaningful they are. Depending on that, my plans for tomorrow could change significantly.”

She still hasn’t pointed the gun at me.

But I can feel the murderous intent radiating off her—I could be killed at the slightest provocation. She started by saying she envied me… What is it about me, who’s been repeatedly saved by Ms. Kyoko, that she envies so much she wants to kill me? I can’t think of any way to escape from this situation—In the end, if I want to live even one second longer, I have no choice but to answer her questions, no matter where she’s sitting.

There’s no one other than Ms. Kyoko who can accomplish anything in that one second… No, this ghillie suit will also use that one second. That’s why she’s trying to get information out of me. The activity history of the Forgetful Detective that only I know… What a situation, facing the true culprit one-on-one in such an obvious climax—even if this isn't on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea, I should be the one getting a confession from the culprit, yet I’m the one who’s going to end up "spilling the secrets.”

But why does the ghillie suit want to know such things? Is she just trying to buy some time before killing me? Even if I start rambling on and on about all this, the Forgetful Detective is already gone—didn’t the ghillie suit herself annihilate the very concept of Kyoko Okitegami? If her goal is to conscript a retired soldier and bring her back to the battlefield, why would she care about adventures that Ms. Kyoko herself doesn’t even remember? Unable to voice such an obvious question, I begin to speak.

Starting with the 'Many-Body Problem' case, the first case for the Forgetful Detective, to the 'Testimonial of Kyoko Okitegami' that delved into art, the 'Resignation Letter of Kyoko Okitegami' that addressed the nature of work, the 'Testament of Kyoko Okitegami' that was a broad interpretation of extended suicide, the fortunate 'Marriage Registration of Kyoko Okitegami', the 'Travelogue of Kyoko Okitegami' that soared above Paris, the 'Ticket of Kyoko Okitegami' that involved various modes of transportation, the indiscriminate 'Challenge Letter of Kyoko Okitegami', the two sides of the same coin in the 'Back Cover of Kyoko Okitegami', the colorful white 'Color Sample of Kyoko Okitegami', the 'Blueprint of Kyoko Okitegami' on the verge of explosion, the 'Musical Score of Kyoko Okitegami' of sound and silence, the 'Bulletin Board of Kyoko Okitegami' filled with friendship, and finally, the 'Memorandum of Kyoko Okitegami' that could be considered a final greeting, up until today...

*TL Note: except for the first case, the volumes mentioned would be: 2, 5, 4, 6, 8, 11, 3, 9, 10, 12, then the two famously unreleased volumes as of yet, and 1

3

“Yeah, yeah. I see, I’ve heard you out. Of course, I made sure to do my research beforehand—I even know some of the adventures of the Forgetful Detective that you don’t know about—ever heard of ‘Kyoko Okitegami’s LOVE SONG’?—but still, hearing a firsthand account from someone involved is different from just going through superficial digital records.”

*TL Note: Kyoko's LOVE SONG is supposed to be a reference to an April Fool's tweet by Shaft: https://x.com/nisioisin_anime/status/582920447882199041

It’s just like war in that respect.

White Horse added with a touch of irony—I, the False Accusations King, might be an “unreliable narrator,” but when it comes to Ms. Kyoko, I pride myself on being an expert.

There’s no Forgetful Detective fan greater than me.

But no matter how much I was pressured, one-on-one, in this perfect locked room, and even though I hadn’t been tortured yet, I found it strange that I had ended up blabbing so freely about this detective, who maintains absolute confidentiality.

My judgment must be impaired.

Even if I was just trying to buy time before being killed by continuing the conversation, I should’ve been more clever, mixing truth and lies to confuse this war criminal.

“In fact, up until now, I was worried. I wondered if I had made a huge mistake—because the Mam I knew seemed completely different from Kyoko Okitegami. But after hearing your story, the image lined up perfectly. The White Mam I know and the style of the Forgetful Detective are the same.”

Style.

She wasn’t talking about fashion sense… there’s no way the best-dressed Ms. Kyoko and the tacky-pajama-wearing Ms. Kyoko could ever match.

“I think… you’ve got the wrong person.”

“Hm?”

“To be honest, even now, as I’m being held captive like this… I can’t shake the feeling that I’m caught up in some terrible misunderstanding. The idea that Ms. Kyoko is a retired soldier… maybe it's just me, being used to false accusations...”

“It’s not that you’re used to false accusations, it’s that you’re peace-addled.”

White Horse dismissed me curtly.

With Ms. Kyoko’s face, she looked down on me with contempt.

“You think of war as some kind of good old fantasy, so you decide it’s unrealistic—you reject not just weapons and strategies but even the warriors themselves. Maybe that’s more accurate? Well, that’s fine. It’s much better than romanticizing it, and Mam worked hard to mass-produce that kind of peace-loving naiveté.”

Just like solving a murder case.

She challenged herself to solve war.

“S-She tried to solve war?”

“In that sense, calling Mam a soldier is far too inaccurate in any language. If you had to find a similar profession, you could call her a war mediator—or maybe a war detective.”

She chuckled, but I, in my peace-addled state, couldn’t laugh at all—I’m probably not the type to laugh at battlefield jokes made on the brink of death.

“Mam didn’t belong to any country’s military. Nor was she a mercenary—if anything, she made enemies of those kinds of organizations. She wasn’t just on the FBI’s radar; she was a top-tier fugitive wanted by the United Nations.”

“T-The United Nations… if you’re going to tell such an unrealistic story, at least stop at Interpol—”

“Why?”

When she tilted her head in puzzlement, I ended up answering—even though I was at a loss for words, I still answered. Was I injected with some truth serum while I was unconscious? Even though that’s something banned by the Geneva Conventions—

“Because—”

“Because?”

Pressed for an answer, I chose my words carefully.

Sure, maybe I am peace-addled, but that doesn't mean I don't watch the news. I've known up until today that wars and conflicts are happening tragically all over the world. Compared to someone with combat experience, I might not measure up at all, but being treated like an absolute fool rubbed me the wrong way. However—

"—Because there's no way one person could stop a war, let alone solve it. Not even the United Nations can do that. Humanity has been waging war for all of history. There's a limit to what one person can do."

"That's *your* limit. Mam used to say this: 'There's a limit to what one person can do, but the power of each individual is limitless'—and yet, all you do is pray at the memorial?"

I was at a loss for words.

I fell silent, as if in a moment of prayer.

"I know you ran off to Okinawa to get away from me—that meddlesome FBI agent, still playing his little games."

"…? He said he'd never met you?"

"If that's what he thinks, he's a blissfully ignorant agent. Just as ignorant as you were when you thought you could deceive me with that escape—though I didn't expect you to come flying back to this nuclear shelter on the same day. Let me guess, maybe you toured the Himeyuri Peace Museum and the Churaumi Aquarium as part of your school trip? Fast as a bullet, like a whirlwind tour."

Coming from a sniper, her remark was not something I could argue with—nor could I claim that I hadn't gone scuba diving with a popular author. In any case, being read like an open book by someone with Ms. Kyoko's face left me even more speechless—comparing my escape to a school trip.

This wasn't even worth torturing for.

"It's not a bad route, but if you wanted to see both the light and shadow of war, you could've thought a little further. Before I set things in motion, I prayed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and afterward, I visited the Yamato Museum in Kure. Learning about the light and shadow of war means something like that, don't you think?"

Actually, she also stopped by Onomichi.

She boasted about her own "whirlwind tour," as if to say hers was better—why Onomichi, I didn't understand, but I couldn't deny her point. If I hadn't accidentally met Professor Satoi, I wouldn't have gone scuba diving or visited the Churaumi Aquarium, and I probably wouldn't have made it to this underground shelter. It was only through the eyes and ears of a genius who had toured all of Okinawa's war memorials, including the Himeyuri Peace Museum, that I even thought of the idea of an air-raid shelter.

"Understanding Picasso's 'Guernica' as just 'something famous' or 'something worth a lot of money' means you don't grasp the genius of it. You can learn about war in an art museum, you know. Is the only thing you're proud of knowing the length of Picasso's full name? Why don't you go recite pi—oh, no, no, that's not what I meant."

White Horse softened her tone, as if trying to win me over.

"I'm not trying to lord it over you. I know about war, and you don't. But that doesn't make me better or deeper as a person—it's ridiculous to talk as if you've got it all figured out just by seeing human wickedness or the dark side of society, right?"

"..."

"But just understand this. Mam was peace-addled, just like you—she was a girl who sincerely prayed for a world without war. And she didn't just pray; she put it into action. When she was eighteen."

Eighteen? I remember hearing—whether it was true or not—that Ms. Kyoko's blank period began when she was seventeen—what's with that connection?

"They say she first started as a volunteer clearing landmines. Like a young Florence Nightingale, she even did some nursing at a field hospital, but at some point, her target shifted to destroying tanks. Or rather, it was the day that field hospital was blown to bits by artillery fire… and on that same day, Mam retaliated by using an anti-materiel sniper rifle. The fastest counterattack."

Landmines. Hospitals. Tanks. Sniper rifles.

I see, so she wasn't just throwing in random battlefield-related words to provoke Ms. Kyoko's memory—she was deliberately laying out items from her past, almost as if opening a photo album.

"Though, to be precise, Mam wasn't a sniper, but a 'sweeper'."

"…So she joined the war to stop it? Like a detective who resorts to illegal activities to catch the culprit?"

“And the fact that she actually managed to stop it is what makes Mam so remarkable.”

She said this with pride, as though boasting about a family member.

If that’s true, then it’s truly something extraordinary, but what kind of mindset leads someone to shoot such a great leader in the back? I’ve heard that killing one’s superior isn’t all that uncommon on the battlefield, though...

“At that time, Mam wiped out about half of the world’s wars in just a few years—it really felt like a clean sweep. If she had continued her activities, she might have actually been able to eradicate war from the world.”

Even if you only believe half of that, it would still mean she resolved about a quarter of the world’s wars… Covering all conceivable mysteries is one thing, but covering all wars? However, if we’re talking about speed alone, that image doesn’t stray too far from the Ms. Kyoko I know. Including the drive that pushes her to such lengths...

But she said, “if.”

“Yes, in the end, it’s all just ‘what ifs.’ Up until Mam was assassinated.”

White Horse glanced at the sniper rifle she held close, like an extension of her body, and said this.

“Huh. Why am I telling you all this? You haven't even asked. I'm practically giving a confession like the real culprit.”

Or rather, it was more like a declaration of guilt, but stopping here would be to leave me hanging—although it wouldn't be strange for me to be killed under these circumstances. So I urged her to continue by asking, “What do you mean by assassination?” to the ‘her’ in the ghillie suit.

“Who would kill a delicate girl who only wishes for peace?”

“There are plenty of people who make a living off of war. I was one of them—being a war orphan, I had no other choice. But I got sick of eating the same crap every day and gathered allies to start a riot. We failed miserably, of course. I was dishonorably discharged and thrown into prison as a war criminal.”

No, I’m not asking about your story.

But I couldn't exactly say that out loud, could I?

“That’s when Mam bought me—she probably had plans to raise me as a body double from the start. Not because we looked alike, but because our brains are wired the same.”

“Brains…”

The shape of the brain. The structure of the brain. The workings of the brain… programming.

“It wasn’t just that she was a delicate girl wishing for peace—Mam must have foreseen her own assassination. No, it’s not something an eighteen or nineteen-year-old girl would normally think about—if she felt a connection with me, who was accused of inciting the masses, then I can only be honored. However, in the end, it wasn’t me, the body double, who took the bullet to the brain; it was Mam herself.”

Or so history would have us believe.

White Horse added this as if it were an afterthought—there was something suggestive in the way she said it. Something unsettling.

“…So after that, you, the body double, took over the war detective’s activities? You didn’t just remain a body double—you became her successor.”

In that case, it could be seen as preparing a successor in case of an emergency… which, in my opinion, is more like something Ms. Kyoko would do.

Peace activities must continue forever, or they will be forgotten.

If a hero dies and that’s the end of it, the embers of conflict will just reignite.

“However, since I became Mam, our activities have been in decline—as you said, the number of wars is doubling again. A rebound effect, or something. Maybe it's proof that even if you look the same and your brains are wired the same, you're not the same person deep down. Not a day went by when I didn’t wish that Mam were still alive—and one day, I started to think this. On the day my entire platoon was wiped out under my command.”

Maybe Mam is still alive?

That Mam of all people, dying after being shot? Are you kidding?

Wasn’t it all just a ruse?

“Like camouflage, like a ghillie suit? Well, it was just a fantasy. Wishful thinking, really. Normally, anyway—but even if I was past my prime, I still had the same brain as Mam. What you call your ‘little grey cells’—so I could sense that Mam was the kind of person who would want to make herself the body double, working behind the scenes. And even though it took time, I can proudly

say that it was thanks to that same brain that I was able to track down the whereabouts of the vanished Mam."

"…Are you saying Ms. Kyoko is that person?"

The first shot that pierced her brain.

The 9-parabellum bullet that robbed her of her memories, of her yesterday—was it all just a camouflage for her assassination?

"Playing dead on the battlefield and deserting your unit isn't all that rare, you know? After trying to be Mam, I understood that feeling. How should I put it… I could feel myself going mad. Even though I was supposed to be chasing ideals, I found myself on the verge of breaking down in the face of reality—because even if you succeed in stopping a war, the aftermath is even more devastating. Starvation, discrimination, inequality, and suicide—they all come in the postwar period. Even during war, it's behind the front lines, not on the battlefield, where the real hell takes place. While brave soldiers are off fighting, the weak are oppressed... in the shadows. I have no idea how Mam managed to deal with those issues. Maybe her heart broke before she could come to terms with it."

"…Is that why you did it—out of resentment?"

At last, I was closing in on the truth—or rather, approaching my own death in the process—but I couldn't stop now, having come this far.

"Were you so outraged that Ms. Kyoko pushed the harsh peace activities onto you while she lived comfortably here in Japan, solving trivial mysteries, that you shot her with a rifle?"

Because she'd forgotten.

Forgotten about the war.

Forgotten about her family.

"Don't get the wrong idea. Do you really think I'd resent Mam, to whom I owe so much?"

There it was again, "Don't get the wrong idea."

As the False Accusations King, my specialty is rather being misunderstood… In that sense, I'm more tsundere than the FBI agent's wife. My predictions being off the mark is nothing new, but would someone shoot a person they don't even resent?

"I assumed… that you were devising all sorts of plans to bring the retired Ms. Kyoko, who had forgotten everything, back to the battlefield…"

I thought she came to this shelter for that reason… Just like me, I thought she had infiltrated here to seek Ms. Kyoko's backup… But in reality, this place was nothing more than a library. Just a…

"Yeah, well, about that. My plan was a bust. I may talk a big game, but I don't fully understand Mam either—that's why it was worth blowing up the building with a tank. Because I got to meet you."

"…"

"After all, I got to hear about her firsthand. What it is like to be her. A story worth its weight in gold—now I can become Kyoko Okitegami."

4

I can become Kyoko Okitegami.

I couldn't grasp the meaning of those words for a moment—after going to such lengths to completely 'erase' Kyoko Okitegami, what on earth was this ghillie suit-clad figure talking about? That's what I thought, but perhaps it was precisely because she was trying to 'erase' her that she had this motivation. As long as Kyoko Okitegami exists, one cannot become Kyoko Okitegami—and 'she' had been raised as Ms. Kyoko's body double.

A successor.

If that's the case, then it's only natural that the successor would want to follow the same path, just like a line of cars following the same route—that would be the 'logical conclusion' as they say in mystery novels—growing weary of the battlefield, forgetting everything, and trying to blend into everyday life.

If their brains are shaped the same.

Speaking of brains, if I were to consider the motive from a purely mystery-solving perspective, it would be akin to a 'body-swap trick,' even if they weren't twins—what a surprise it was to realize that the whirlwind tour to Onomichi was a blatant hint, foreshadowing the twist by namedropping the location in which that film 'I Are You, You Am Me' takes place. But White Horse didn't reveal anything so outlandish that it could be called a 'twist.'

Because she couldn't understand the feeling of forgetting family, she was trying to understand it.

When I first heard the idea that Ms. Kyoko might be a retired soldier, I dismissed it outright, thinking it couldn't possibly be true, that it was impossible. But what if I turned that thought around?

If that idea seems strange, then what exactly should a retired soldier become?

Mr. White Birch, the FBI agent and the person who could be called Kyoko Okitegami's creator, said he had no military experience—but even if he did, it wouldn't have been a bad thing. In fact, that career should be respected.

Likewise, no one has any right to complain if a veteran takes on a completely unrelated job—it's a person's freedom to become whatever they want after risking their life for their country.

What would be an acceptable career for a retired soldier?

A teacher, a novelist, a singer, a blogger, an F1 racer, a pastry chef, a dancer, an athlete, an animator, a young entrepreneur, a designer… or they could even travel the world, picking up odd jobs as they go.

And of course, they could become a detective.

To deny a soldier's second career would be to affirm the fact that war will never end—or do you think their job is to suffer from battlefield trauma for the rest of their life?

So, if this sniper wants to change out of a ghillie suit and into an Inverness coat, that intention should be respected—just as freedom of expression must be protected, so too must freedom of career choice, a fundamental human right.

However.

"But that doesn't mean it's okay to pursue a new career by shooting someone—especially not by shooting your benefactor."

"Is that so? If my reading—if my deduction is correct, then Mam didn't shoot someone else or her benefactor; she shot herself. She shot her own brain, her own grey matter. So wouldn't it be perfectly natural for me, her body double, to put a second bullet in her?—It's the same as targeting my own brain."

It's sophistry. It is sophistry, but at the same time, I found myself begrudgingly convinced by her twisted logic—to shoot Ms. Kyoko's brain from that distance, through the same tunnel as the bullet that had once passed through, hitting the exact same spot, was a feat of incredible marksmanship. But if the shooter was her successor, with the same brain structure, it would be anatomically possible to aim for those same grey cells.

Just as Ms. Kyoko herself once faked her own death—by faking her memory.

To reset her life.

“Though it feels strange to say this after the fact, I’m actually skeptical about the idea of physically erasing memory with a bullet. Part of me thinks Mam just went bonkers from her wartime experiences—being on a battlefield day in and day out probably does more damage to your brain cells than a single bullet ever could. Like… like crushing those little packing peanuts they use in boxes.”

That might be true. If it were me, I’m not confident I could keep my sanity even for a day. Not only on the battlefield, but I’d probably want to forget everything—throw away my life up to that point and start over fresh, with a clean slate.

In that sense, it’s ironic yet inevitable that White Horse is trying to follow the exact same path as Ms. Kyoko.

This is hardly an “unexpected motive.”

And in the end, maybe that’s all there is to it, I think to myself with a sense of detachment… perhaps complete peace will never come unless everyone becomes so sick of war that they want to throw everything away.

Only when there’s enough despair to make commentators who say things like “war is cool” or “weapons are awesome” seem like comedians, will people finally be able to join hands—and if that’s the case, then maybe I can understand, at least a little, why White Mam came to hate stopping wars, and why wars haven’t been eradicated for thousands of years.

At least, I can pretend to understand.

If the only way to stop a war is for all those drafted to become deserters—then in a sense, Ms. Kyoko set an example. If the leader won’t run, no one will… and this ghillie suit is following her lead.

“Heheh. Maybe I'm letting myself off the hook a little there. It's not fair to make it sound like Mam manipulated me into shooting her—what do they call that? ‘Murder by proxy’?”

“…”

“Of course, as you've brilliantly deduced, the idea of bringing Mam back to the battlefield wasn’t entirely absent from my original motive—I wanted to nudge her, to see if I could jog her memory. And, let's face it, if I could be led by Mam again, the battlefield wouldn't be so bad. But that sounds so self-righteous. The truth is, I feel a pang of guilt about abandoning my subordinates who believed in me as if I were Mam. That's where I'm different from her, just a regular guy. Besides, to stop the upcoming Third World War, Mam’s charisma is absolutely necessary.”

After saying that casually, White Horse—or rather, the second Forgetful Detective—added as if in jest, “Huh. Was that classified information?”

“Sorry, sorry. Forget what I just said.”

“Huh? Wait, Third World War—?”

“I didn’t say anything. And don’t worry, it won’t happen in the way you’re thinking. As Einstein said...”

White Horse smiled, alluding to the famous quote: "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones."

“This little nuclear shelter definitely won’t protect us. It’s a war that even I, the second in line, couldn’t possibly stop. That’s why I did want to bring the original Mam back, as a secondary objective.”

“…So your primary motive was because you ‘wanted to become a detective’?”

“I wanted to be a woman like Mam. That's more accurate, I think… but that’s how it is, isn’t it? Even Mam probably didn’t want to become a master detective—she wanted to be like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Kogoro Akechi, or Kosuke Kindaichi, right?”

She displayed her piecemeal knowledge from having read twenty books in a short time. It’s like the saying, “The taller the mountain, the broader its base”… a genre can only expand when it has a star, and for White Horse, Ms. Kyoko was exactly that kind of star.

How sinful.

Not that it justifies shooting your benefactor in the brain.

“The more Mam prevents the Third World War, the longer I can live out my days as a detective. But even if it doesn’t happen, that’s fine. If I can spend just one day like Mam, that would be enough for me. What was it again, the Forgetful Detective’s catchphrase? ‘For Ms. Kyoko—”

“—There is only today.’”

Once it’s revealed, it’s nothing special. Far from being an “unexpected motive,” it’s as ordinary as wishing for world peace. Anyone can have a desire to be someone other than themselves—even I wanted to be a master detective when I was a kid.

But just as I wished for world peace without taking any concrete action, I may have enthusiastically talked about my admiration for master detectives, but I never did anything about it—if there’s a difference between me and the person in the ghillie suit, that would be it.

I became a client as the False Accusations King.

She became a sniper as a body double.

And just like on the battlefield of the past, today as well, the shadow tries to become the light—

“…I think it’s impossible. Not today, not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow—not even a hundred days from now, or a thousand days from now, could you ever become Kyoko Okitegami.”

Not even the fastest detective, let alone the Forgetful Detective.

I said it. Why did I say it?

Why did I go out of my way to provoke the “real culprit”—this isn’t some memory-loss patient, so what’s the point of riling her up? I was the one who needed to remember, to remind myself of the situation I was in. Don’t I see it? The sniper rifle in her hands.

In times like this, I should just go along with the conversation… flatter her, praise her unique perspective. Go all out to butter her up. So why did I deliberately say something that would only antagonize her?

I’ve talked too much. Both me and White Horse.

This kind of outlandish exchange, like the resolution in a mystery novel, is something that could never happen in a real-life interrogation, the kind where prisoners were routinely tortured for information.

A confession without evidentiary value, a boastful revelation of secrets. Such things would be unthinkable in a war chronicle.

And yet, my mouth moves on its own.

I’m saying things that are completely out of character, things that would upset the second generation.

“You've evaluated me as a storyteller, I suppose, because you were able to extract every last drop of information about Kyoko Okitegami from me as a firsthand witness. And from my perspective, you, as the second generation, are Ms. Kyoko's backup. Though it was unexpected that you'd be here, it could also be said that my purpose has been fulfilled. However, my story is ultimately just my story, and a backup is just a backup... Even if they're similar, they're not the same, and they can't be the same.”

In reality, the switcheroo trick doesn't hold up.

Not even with identical twins sharing the same DNA.

“Go on. You’ve piqued my interest.”

‘And my murderous intent too,’ White Horse urged me without a change in expression—but then again, she'd been radiating murderous intent from the start. This unwavering composure, however, suggested she was already getting a feel for the Forgetful Detective.

Yet that was all it was. Nothing more.

“The truth is, you were found out the moment I laid eyes on you. For all your resemblance, you couldn't even manage a convincing Ms. Kyoko impression when I was still half-asleep.”

“If I’d wanted to, I could have. Nice to meet you, Mr. Yakusuke Kakushidate. I’m Kyoko Okitegami, the detective.”

She said this with a bow of her head—indeed, if she had done that at the start, my theory might not have held up. But the fact that this action came thirty minutes later already disqualifies her as the fastest detective.

Of course, if this case were a book, the cover would likely feature Ms. Kyoko in a ghillie suit, holding a sniper rifle. A classic case of narrative deception, revealing the true culprit's identity through the cover art.

In the first phase, the detective role is stripped away; in the second, she comes with a delay; in the third, her appearances were reduced to voice-overs; in the fourth, she has no role at all; and finally, in the fifth phase, a replacement appears. It’s less of a brilliant detective and more like an actor who couldn’t fit the drama’s schedule anymore.

Even so.

“Oh right, you’re angry because I’ve been using such important books as a seat, aren’t you? Because ‘Ms. Kyoko’ would never do such a thing—my bad, my bad. I'm a bit dense when it comes to other people's anger. But hey, thanks for the heads-up. I'll try to be more careful. Now that I think about it, before Mam retired… right before she was assassinated, she helped with a rescue operation for some Japanese publisher who had wandered into a dangerous area. Something about 'Books for the Battlefield,' a social contribution project or whatever..."

It’s Mr. Kondo, I understood instinctively.

I see, that episode where Mr. Kondo, who was working at the overseas branch, had contact with someone who seemed to be Ms. Kyoko… the story where he got helped must have been from

that time. Who would have thought he had actually been saved from death? No wonder Mr. Kondo was reluctant to talk about it.

That’s practically a war story in itself.

“At that time, Mam received a bunch of books from some writer as a thank-you gift. If that's what sparked Mam's attachment to them, then yeah, I guess I should treat them with respect. Thanks for reminding me of an episode I’d overlooked. Using them as a seat is totally out of line. But here's a thought: what if that's all in your head? If you really cherish books, wouldn't 'not reading' them be the best way to keep them in perfect condition?”

She hit a sore spot.

The more you read a book, the more it wears out—that’s obvious just by looking at the spines of the books lined up in this library. The Ms. Kyoko I know would never use a book as a seat, but she’s also not the type of reader who buys books just to preserve them. She's more likely to be found reading in the bath, water droplets be damned.

But that's also the beauty of books.

No matter how roughly you handle them, they don’t break easily—not even on the battlefield.

Unlike my smartphone, even if you drop them from a high floor, the contents aren’t lost.

“Preservation… If that’s the goal, then there’s no point in preserving books like this once you’ve finished reading them.”

I knew it was a pointless question, yet I asked it anyway.

Like a war that has already begun, even though it might still be possible to turn back.

“You could throw them away after reading them. You could pass them on to friends or sell them to a secondhand bookstore. But Ms. Kyoko chose to preserve them like this. I don’t know about the Third World War, but at the very least, this place is sturdy enough to withstand a nuclear attack. Why do you think that is?”

"Damn, you've got me hooked. Tell me more."

“Because neither you nor I, but this library itself, is Ms. Kyoko’s backup—how a person reads books shapes who they are.”

“Hahah.”

She took it well.

However, her camouflage-painted smile, while pleased, didn't quite reach the level of a victory pose. White Horse continued, “That sounds like something people from a highly literate region would say.”

“In the place where I come from, which once existed on Earth—though it’s never appeared on a Japanese-made map—drawing pictures in the dirt with stones was our greatest form of entertainment. If someone dared to call that a wonderful culture or art that should be passed down to future generations, I’d kill them, whether they were a civilian or a volunteer.”

As if I had said something like that, she adjusted her grip on the sniper rifle she was holding—not in a ceremonial way, but as if she were maintaining it.

As if, as a professional, she was taking care to be cautious before shooting.

“Then we would play soldiers again. Books? There were no books. Not since a bunch of adults were executed just for reading or writing. They suffered a much worse fate than a brute like me, a war criminal. Well, you're right, I guess. How you interact with books does determine your life—until Mam taught me to read, I had never read a book.”

So cut me some slack for my lack of etiquette—she said this while continuing to fiddle with the gun. Though she might not know much about books, handling a gun was literally second nature to her.

“But if you ask me, you and Mam put too much stock in books. That’s as foolish as trying to find meaning in war. After all, aren’t books just the source material for movies?”

Regardless of the merit of her argument, it was a statement that confirmed her position as someone who wasn’t just trying to be a master detective, but Ms. Kyoko herself—though it didn’t seem like she had a particularly strong stance on movies either, as she quickly retracted her statement with, “Well, that's a terrible analogy.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I may be a war criminal, but I'm also a veteran. I'll heed your advice. As I said earlier, I don’t really see the fun in it, but if reading these books will make me like Mam, I’ll read every single one in this library. Yes, all by today.”

She could probably pull it off, if ‘she’ really is Ms. Kyoko’s backup.

But that won’t work—it’s commendable enthusiasm, but this torturer seemed to have missed the point of my captive ramblings.

“Books aren’t something you can just read. How you read them shapes who you are—didn’t I just say that? How you read them. Reading a book in an hour, versus spending a day on it, versus taking a week to finish it, gives a completely different meaning.”

That’s true even for Ms. Kyoko. She’s no exception.

When she read through a hundred books by her favorite author in five days straight, day and night, she didn’t enjoy it much—more like she didn’t enjoy it at all. The same book, read by the same person, could evoke entirely different reactions with the slightest change in circumstances.

“It’s not just about the speed of reading. Even with the same content, different editions can feel surprisingly different—the cover design, the bookmark design, whether it’s a hardcover or a paperback, simply the price. Where you bought it—whether it was from a bookstore or a secondhand shop, or if you borrowed it from a friend. Whether it’s a new translation, fully annotated, a first edition, a revised edition, or a private edition. Whether it’s a book your parents bought for you, one your grandparents bought for you, or one you bought with your own pocket money. Whether you bought it on the release day or let it sit for half a year before reading it. Whether you read the original after seeing the movie or read it as a preview before watching the movie. Whether you read it because it's a bestseller, or because it's sparked controversy, or without any prior knowledge. The first and millionth copy of a million-selling book are completely different entities. Where you read the book matters too. Even with the same book, the impression changes if it’s recommended by your parents, a lover, or a favorite author. Reading a book that no one around you has read is different from reading it as part of a book club with friends. The order in which you read books—whether you follow a lineage or going against the grain—also matters. A chance encounter can make even the most exceptional book completely unmemorable. And sometimes, a book you'd later deem tasteless, grotesque, even morally questionable, can change your life. A book bought with a gift card you received as a celebration? Of course, that’s different. Depending on your psychological state, age, position, and circumstances, you may empathize with the protagonist or the villain. A book read while hospitalized and a book read during wartime can’t possibly be the same, right? That's what I mean when I say how you read shapes who you are.”

Even if she could finish reading this Okitegami Library in under a day, it would be completely different from Ms. Kyoko’s reading experience—the Okitegami Library in this bunker functions as a backup only for Ms. Kyoko herself.

The torn covers, folded pages, coffee stains, dog-eared corners, stains, the wear and tears, the arrangement of the pages—each imperfection is a key that opens the door to memories. In other words, to put it bluntly without a shadow of a doubt, this is the true…

“Memorandum of Kyoko Okitegami.”

“You understand now, right? If you want to read like she did, a day or two, ten days, or a hundred days won’t be enough—it’ll take twenty-five years. In other words, about ten thousand days later, maybe you’ll become Ms. Kyoko? Perhaps even a master detective?”

“—Too bad.”

She said that, sounding genuinely disappointed—White Horse casually held the sniper rifle with one hand, like it was a handgun, and pointed the muzzle at me. Even an amateur would think that shooting in such a way wouldn’t end well for her either, but she didn’t seem to care at all about her stance.

“I was starting to think I might keep you around, as a regular customer, or my personal storyteller—I wasn’t lying when I said I envied you for staying by the detective’s side all the time. But oh well. Losing a regular customer as I reopen the detective agency is a shame, but there are other narrators. Like a bodyguard, a police inspector, or a self-proclaimed best friend.”

“...I suppose there are.”

“By the way, here’s something I’m curious about: isn’t killing someone just because they pissed you off more of a thing in detective novels? On the battlefield, it’s pretty standard—regardless of whether they’re friend or foe.”

In mysteries, that’s generally considered an unrefined motive—not that saying so would do much to beg for my life. Just because you’ve won an argument doesn’t mean the culprit will gracefully turn themselves in—just like reading a book doesn’t always lead to personal growth.

Good grief. I’m beaten, thoroughly beaten.

I’d always suspected that this False Accusations King would one day be wrongfully executed by guillotine in a public square, but it turns out that was completely off the mark—instead of a public execution, I was facing an impromptu shooting for the perfectly legitimate crime of insulting a soldier.

However, there’s a part of me that feels strangely satisfied—though it would be abnormal to say I’m happy, and it’s just an obvious bluff. Like a suspect who refuses to settle and chooses to go to trial to prove their innocence, there’s a part of Yakusuke Kakushidate that’s satisfied with having said what he wanted to say without needing to be coerced into a confession in the interrogation room—having narrated everything as Kyoko Okitegami’s storyteller.

To die surrounded by books would be a fulfillment of my deepest wish.

And besides, isn’t it the ultimate fantasy?

It’s not just about being falsely accused of being a sniper; it’s a romance—a closed-room murder in a nuclear shelter, the ultimate locked-room mystery. If I could ask for more, it would have been perfect if Ms. Kyoko could have solved this closed-room mystery.

But the Forgetful Detective is no longer here. No one can become her.

And even if someone could… they wouldn't be faster than a bullet.

"Goodbye, Mr. Yakusuke."

With those final words, as if concluding a twenty-five-year-long detective novel, the sniper pulled the trigger, effortlessly and without hesitation.

The fastest, final bullet.

Kyoko Okitegami's Conscription—Remembered

最終話　掟上今日子の終戦日

Final Ch: Kyoko Okitegami’s End of the War

Where is this? Who am I?

I, the so-called False Accusations King, almost muttered those forgotten words as I woke up on a hospital bed—not in a field hospital, nor in a bunker, but as if the story were returning to its beginning in an endless loop, I was in the very same hospital room where I was first suspected of the executive shooting incident. The shattered window had been replaced, but it was unmistakably the same room.

To think I'd be given VIP treatment. Though I suppose RIP would be more fitting.

I’m terrified by the scarcity of available hospital rooms—more so by the hospital bill that’s sure to come.

“Are you awake, Mr. Kakushidate?”

A voice called out to me as I lay there, still barely able to open one eye—a person seated on a pipe chair by the bed. With her entirely white hair and glasses, she made even the pipe chair seem like a comfortable armchair.

“Your name is Kakushidate, right? Nice to meet you. I’m Kyoko Okitegami, the detective.”

“…”

Uh, what?

Is this a dream? Am I dreaming within a dream?

Such a “nested structure” was once all the rage in the mystery world… The white-haired woman was dressed in a calm, chic outfit appropriate for a hospital visit—certainly not a tacky pajama, nor a ghillie suit, nor camo face paint. As I mentioned earlier, she wasn’t perched atop a stack of books—and what she was holding wasn’t a sniper rifle, but a book with a cover.

Misremembering and misnaming people is a classic trait for a master detective.

“Am I… dead? Was I shot…?”

Is this not a dream but the afterlife?

It’s plausible. At the very least, it seems more likely than the possibility that I’m still alive. Unlike Ms. Kyoko, I’m neither tough nor lucky enough to survive a shot to the head—no, but then, if

that were the case, it would be strange for the tough and lucky Ms. Kyoko to be by my bedside. That's proof that this isn't the afterlife.

"Well, the 'circumstantial evidence' is all there."

Ms. Kyoko said this with a smile—a mystery term.

"And this book… perhaps it serves as 'physical evidence.'"

Saying this, she placed the book she was holding gently on the bed, saying, "I've finished reading it, so I'm returning it to you."

"I meant it as a gift. A get-well present."

Though I was still disoriented, I recognized the book—it was the 'foreshadowing' I had asked Mr. Kondo to arrange just before my flight to Okinawa. As expected of a capable man, it was wrapped in a cover resembling gift paper, but from its thickness, I was fairly certain—it was "Writhing God" by Hirubei Sunaga.

It's the mystery novel by Hirubei Sunaga that Ms. Kyoko said she first read... Didn't she mention she got into it through the movie?

To be honest, it was more of a throwaway line from a fugitive than actual foreshadowing. I simply arranged for a delivery of a book she used to like before becoming a detective, so she wouldn't get bored during her hospital stay and do something unnecessary—like, say, seeking out some unfortunate visitor who'd stepped on a landmine out of sheer curiosity. I'd figured it was better for her to immerse herself in an old book than to be exposed to the latest news or buy drab clothes. At that time, I thought all the books Ms. Kyoko owned had been burned—never imagining they had survived underground, untouched by the war.

I wasn't hoping for anything as convenient as Ms. Kyoko recovering her memories touchingly by reading the mystery novels she once loved—I certainly didn't intend that. I had no idea at the time that the books brought to the battlefield by an elite publisher who had strayed into a war zone were what prompted Ms. Kyoko to retire.

In fact, I thought it was pointless. If she had forgotten mystery terms, reading a mystery novel would be like reading a book in a foreign language she didn't know—or at the very least, like trying to read a book in Japanese without knowing any kanji, just picking out the hiragana. It might be as difficult to retain as a specialized book in a field she had no interest in.

Not to mention, I wasn't even sure if she would read a mysterious book sent by a suspect who had been cleared of charges—it was as questionable as I was. It's a common story that when someone suspicious recommends a book, it makes you not want to read it.

But—that underground shelter.

Seeing the Okitegami Library, one could argue that my expectations were, if anything, too modest—if that itself was, in fact, the memorandum that formed the Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami. It's too much of a coincidence to say that it was the unsung hero.

A reading experience akin to a battlefield experience.

“So... you remembered, Ms. Kyoko?”

“Yes. I remembered… how to forget.”

Saying this, Ms. Kyoko rolled up her left sleeve—and of course, it was written there:

“I am Kyoko Okitegami. Detective. Twenty-five years old. Director of the Okitegami Detective Agency. My memory resets each time I sleep.”

She remembered how to forget…

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, I couldn’t immediately tell—as expected, the small bandage, camouflaged by her white bangs, remained in place, but seemed White Horse's attempts to revive her memories of the battlefield, through whatever means, had been reversed, returning her to a blank slate—even though I doubt she shot herself in the head again to make it happen…

No, wait.

What happened to White Horse?

What happened to that doppelgänger of Ms. Kyoko? And what about me? How had I survived a point-blank execution? Panic belatedly set in, and I tried to sit up, but Ms. Kyoko gently stopped me. "Please, Mr. Kakushidate, take it easy." Her index finger rested on my forehead, and I was paralyzed.

It was as if I had been sniped.

“You need to take care of yourself. You were on the brink of death, after all.”

"..."

I was on the brink of death? Really?

However, it doesn't seem like there's a bullet hole in my forehead where Ms. Kyoko's finger is pressing... and it's not like the False Accusations King has forgotten any mystery terms. If we consider 'false accusation' a mystery term, that is.

"White Horse was restrained by the local police and then handed over to the FBI agents."

"… The FBI."

"If she had only targeted me, I might have let her go, as is a detective's prerogative at the end of a case—but 'she' first targeted a corporate executive in this room, an unrelated third party."

According to Japanese law, she must be prosecuted under federal law—Ms. Kyoko said with a composed face. A composed smile.

"However, I'm sure she'll be released soon. There's no cage that can contain that bronco."

"Did you… save me, Ms. Kyoko?"

It was a rhetorical question. There was no other possibility—but how could it be? That's even harder to believe. White Horse had snapped, calmly and quietly, and pulled the trigger—saving me faster than the bullet could reach me would be more impossible than an 'impossible crime.'

It's easy to imagine that Ms. Kyoko, who remembered she had amnesia, would 'deduce' the existence of the underground space beneath the destroyed detective agency. Even the former doppelgänger, or even I, could have made that 'deduction.' An exhaustive deduction would never overlook such a possibility. And if she remembered that she had sealed some kind of memorandum in that shelter, she would surely go read it, whether she was in the hospital or in the middle of the night.

To reclaim her identity as a master detective.

Visiting a ruin to become a perfect Forgetful Detective, in other words, to reinforce her amnesia, is a 'logical conclusion'—even if it was just that re-reading "Writhing God" made her want to read more Sunaga works. So, even if Ms. Kyoko had rushed to that prisoner torture scene, it wouldn't be unnatural at all for the fastest detective.

But even then, she couldn't have made it in time.

Even the fastest detective couldn't be faster than a fired rifle bullet, as was proven right here in this hospital room—

"You're right. I can't outrun a bullet that's already been fired—but I can be faster than one that hasn't been fired yet. That's what it means to be the fastest detective."

“…Well, that’s true, but…”

That’s like a halted bullet. Even I’m faster than a bullet like that. Even a tortoise would be faster... hm?

“So... you mean it was a dud?”

It’s something that can happen with a certain probability. In fact, it’s said to be quite common on the battlefield. What do they call it... a jam? But still, White Horse had meticulously maintained the rifle, even before pointing the muzzle at me in anger, to prevent such a mishap, hadn’t she?

“I made it a dud. By lowering the oxygen concentration in the shelter.”

She said it as casually as "I turned down the AC because it was getting hot," and I made a small reaction, a weak “oh”—not a great response to a detective’s mystery-solving, but at that moment, I wasn’t so much surprised by the revealed truth as relieved by how everything suddenly made sense, leaving me feeling rather deflated.

Whether it was a nuclear shelter or a library, the air conditioning in that underground space had to be completely controlled—temperature, humidity, and yes, oxygen concentration. I should have guessed that, just like in the National Diet Library, there would be a system in place to extinguish fires through air conditioning rather than sprinklers—and that it was a perfect sealed room.

“They say bullets can be fired even in a vacuum, but that’s only if humans could survive in a vacuum, right? I suppose we should 'disregard air resistance' in this scenario as well?”

Without oxygen, you can’t pull the trigger.

Naturally, this also prevents the oxidation of books—ah, I see, that’s why I so easily spilled information about Ms. Kyoko just by being asked. This also explains why White Horse, even though she didn’t need to, went on a villainous monologue, revealing where her motives for the crime lay, and even more, why she tried to kill me so impulsively.

It was simply due to a lack of oxygen. Oxygen deprivation.

Both I and ‘she’ had lowered blood oxygen concentrations, making logical thinking impossible and impairing normal judgment—indeed, the rifle bullet may have been a dud, but if I was nearly shot due to the lowered oxygen concentration, then it’s like creating a problem and then solving it yourself. But, that wasn’t Ms. Kyoko’s intention in the first place, was it?

The primary goal was to subdue the culprit in the sealed room—it’s much rougher than dealing with a landmine using concrete, and the fact that I was included is a slight oversight, but I had to admit, it was a brilliant locked-room trick.

If the oxygen concentration had dropped enough to stiffen the finger pulling the trigger, then it's only natural that both I and 'she' passed out soon after... and that I woke up in the hospital. It makes sense. Still, it's strange that we're alive. It wouldn't have been surprising if we'd continued to sleep in a grave.

You say I was on the verge of death... but you were trying to kill me.

It seemed like I was being saved, but it was a double-pronged assassination attempt, with attacks from both the light and the shadows. Come to think of it, I was almost suffocated in a sleeper hold when I met the doppelgänger... I unexpectedly experienced firsthand the uncanny resemblance between the body double and the original.

"*Giggle*, even so, you're lucky, Mr. Kakushidate."

"Well, I guess... just being alive is lucky enough."

"Perhaps it's because she was small like me, but the true culprit, Miss White Horse, didn't get enough oxygen to her brain, and when she woke up from fainting, she had amnesia—serves her right, but perhaps it's what she wanted."

If she wanted to become the Forgetful Detective.

That's what Ms. Kyoko said.

Just where had she been listening to my exchange with White Horse...? And I don't just mean which parts, but also, from where? It's quite possible that the first one to reach that underground shelter wasn't me or the one in the ghillie suit, but Ms. Kyoko.

Because she's the fastest detective.

I was fixated on the impressive library, but naturally, there must have been other living spaces, a machine room with a control panel for indoor management, and places to hide... she was more like the host of a death game than a detective. If the confession White Horse forced out of me served to reinstall information into Ms. Kyoko, eavesdropping in the next room, then I suppose you could say it was the ultimate satisfaction of a storyteller.

"I was worried and ended up staying awake for three days and nights, but it seems you haven't lost your memory, Mr. Kakushidate, so I'm relieved. I'm proud as a detective that I was able to protect the client's interests—payment in cash, please."

To think she had been by my side, caring for me for three days and nights... I was touched—though, if something were to happen to me, it really would have ended with the "detective = culprit" scenario. And it seems she's also remembered being both an amnesiac and

a money-grubber, since Ms. Kyoko said this nonchalantly as she stood up from the pipe chair. It seems I should be more worried about that than the private room hospital fees—or so I thought, but then the miser smiled mischievously and said, “Just kidding.”

“Thanks to your gift, Mr. Kakushidate, I was able to return to being the Forgetful Detective, so I’ll consider this time as volunteer work—thank you very much. I won’t forget this for a lifetime—no, for a day.”

Saying this, she bowed her head deeply, her white hair falling forward.

Free of charge.

As I was left speechless, but in a different way than before,

“Well, then, I’ll be taking my leave. Though I have no home to return to—please continue to patronize the Okitegami Detective Agency in the future. Although, there’s no detective agency either.”

With that, Ms. Kyoko quickly moved to leave the room, as if to suggest there was no need to stay any longer—it was proper etiquette for a visitor, but still.

“Ah, um.”

I rudely called out to Ms. Kyoko just as she was about to leave.

“Uh... what will you do from here?”

“What will I do? Even though I’ve been discharged from the hospital, as I mentioned earlier, I have no home, so I suppose I’ll recuperate at a hotel for now. I’ll have to work hard to rebuild the agency. But first, I think I’ll sleep. For seventy-two hours, to make up for the three days and nights.”

“You won’t return to the battlefield just because you have no home to go back to, will you?”

If she had heard the conversation between me and the one in the ghillie suit, then she must have also heard ‘her’ other plan—though it was a secondary objective, the motive of bringing Ms. Kyoko back to the battlefield... and her prayer for world peace by making her former boss stop the Third World War—how did Ms. Kyoko interpret that?

I wonder.

“She's got the wrong person.”

Ms. Kyoko turned her head slightly.

The way she shrugged her shoulders was even more picturesque than the FBI agent or the doppelgänger—wrong person? Wasn't that... something I said, not the one in the ghillie suit?

"They say there are three people in the world who look just like you. Miss White Horse must have mistaken me for this 'Ms. Mam' or whoever—my, my, what a coincidence. As if I would ever participate in a war. Look at these delicate arms."

She said, rolling up her sleeve again.

Showing that left arm with the detective's ID written on it.

"Really, doppelgängers? You shouldn't go around spreading such ridiculous theories, Mr. Kakushidate."

"...Are you serious?"

"Yes. I have absolutely no memory of it."

With that, the conversation comes to an end. An abrupt ceasefire, without any proper resolution or consideration for the aftermath.

But I couldn't let it end yet.

There was one last question that wasn't a mystery or a wonder, but it was something I absolutely had to address—some may consider it trivial, but to me, it was more important than anything else. Perhaps even more so than the Forgetful Detective's past.

"Ms. Kyoko."

"Yes?"

"You are... Ms. Kyoko, right?"

Now, I wasn't questioning her identity just because she waived my fee... well, of course, that's an important reason, but more than that, I couldn't shake this doubt, this suspicion that I harbored. It was more suspicious than her sitting on a book.

Regardless of the oxygen concentrations.

Even if White Horse read every mystery novel in that library, she could never become the Forgetful Detective—just as you can't claim to have gone to war just by hearing war stories, you can't relive the experience of reading a book... I said that, as I lost my sanity due to oxygen

deprivation with a gun pointed at me, but I can’t help but feel that maybe it’s not entirely impossible.

After all, humans can even read someone else’s book review and feel as if they’ve read the book themselves—even without owning the book, just having the merchandise can make them feel like a devoted reader. How many quotes from books we haven’t read do we actually use? There’s even the perspective that a truly great book is one that can be discussed knowledgeably even by those who haven’t read it.

If Ms. Kyoko remembered her amnesiac condition through "Writhing God," couldn't White Horse, with the same brain, easily become Kyoko Okitegami in that same library?—The fact that the oxygen concentration was controlled externally, causing both me and the ghillie suit to lose consciousness, might be the undeniable truth.

And because of that, the war criminal ended up with a self-inflicted memory disorder—but if she had her mind wiped clean like that, wouldn’t it be possible to cram in a reading experience?

Twenty-five years of reading experience, in a single day.

Ms. Kyoko, who had been listening to my interrogation from another room, could have set up a replacement for herself—a stand-in detective, just like when she recruited a body double before.

And then she wrote a handwritten memorandum on ‘her’ arm, and afterward, with the help of the FBI agent, she might have already returned to the battlefield—to stop the Third World War.

A classic switcheroo. The ‘detective = culprit’ trope.

“I see, I see. That certainly leaves room for a ‘reasonable doubt,’ doesn’t it? The fact that the Third World War hasn’t started yet is the ‘circumstantial evidence,’ I suppose. As a master detective, I must clear my name of this false accusation.”

Ms. Kyoko, who was about to leave, didn't seem particularly bothered even when the identity written on her rolled-up sleeve, or perhaps the identity on her identification tag, was questioned. However, she reversed course, closing the open hospital room door, and then headed toward the window.

“If you ask me now, the Third World War has long since begun, and Japan is fully participating as well. But let's not dwell on that.”

Saying something that we should actually dwell on, she locked the window that had been opened for ventilation, and even drew the curtains—despite there being no sniper in the distance.

Hold on, why is she turning my hospital room into a locked room?

I barely escaped being shot for saying something unnecessary, and yet here I am again, today, saying something stupid—Ms. Kyoko, who had returned from the window to me with a smile as unfathomable as the depths below the earth, didn't sit back down on the pipe chair but instead, saying "Excuse me," climbed up onto the hospital bed with both hands, in a natural yet unnatural flow.

"M-Ms. Kyoko?"

"Now that I think about it, there's no need to go to a hotel when there's a perfectly good bed right here. If all I want to do is sleep."

When I reflexively tried to sit up, Ms. Kyoko stopped me this time by straddling my torso—it was a grappling move to restrain pointless resistance, clearly different in nature from the military combat techniques inflicted on me by the war criminal in the nuclear shelter.

And then, Ms. Kyoko brought her face close to mine, as if forcing me to confirm her identity—the face that could only belong to Kyoko Okitegami.

"If you suspect me of being an imposter, please feel free to give me a thorough body check. As thoroughly as they measured one's sitting height in the past, every nook and cranny."

Kyoko Okitegami's End of the War—Forgotten

Appendix

Six months later, Ms. Aritsugu Satoi's new work, "The Carrier Pigeon Race", was released.

Just as she said, it was a lighthearted school comedy where nothing unpleasant happened—except that outside the school, a war had been raging for over a century. Amidst the massacres and bombings that made you want to turn away, the children lived peacefully, always smiling, with nothing unpleasant happening to them.

Even if it wasn't as widely accepted as her previous hits, even if it didn't immediately resonate with young readers who have never known war, I felt that this was a work worth putting out into the world, more for its message than its economic impact. But to my surprise, it actually became a regular, bona fide smash hit.

Geniuses really are something.

"The License Plate of Kyoko Okitegami"—Forgotten

But never forget war and peace.

Afterword

As human beings, we forget many things just by living, but there are two types of forgetting. There's the kind of thing you can remember if someone reminds you, and the kind of thing you can't remember even if someone tries to remind you. These are critically different. The same can be said of how we remember things—there's a difference between constantly remembering something and being able to recall it when prompted. Even though both are technically 'remembering,' they feel quite different. If I were to compare it to clothes, it might be like the difference between everyday wear and formal attire. You definitely own the clothes, but where did you put them... And when you open the wardrobe, you might think, "Oh, I had this outfit? When did I buy it?" But the fact that you own it is undeniable... Even if you stop wearing it and get rid of it, you might still remember that you once owned it. Or you could end up in a situation where you say, "I definitely learned something once, and I'm sure I know it, but what did I know again?" It's like studying for a school exam—you remember studying the subject, but you don't remember what you studied. In those cases, maybe it would be less frustrating if you could just forget you ever studied it in the first place. If you can't recall something you should know, it might be more satisfying to assert firmly, even when others point it out, "No, I don't know anything about that at all."

To give some background, the first story was written as a special short piece titled "Kyoko Okitegami's Amnesia" for the final issue of Mephisto magazine. The theme was "What would it feel like to forget that you're an amnesiac?" I planned to reset everything after that and go back to the usual Forgetful Detective with an untroubled face. However, when I actually started writing, it didn't quite work out that way, and for the first time in a while, I remembered the words on the ceiling. Even though that wasn't my intention, I ended up bringing that character back... As a result, I think I was able to write a more special, more original novel, returning to the roots of the series. In that sense, this book is a completely self-indulgent novel that I forgot about. This was the thirteenth installment of the Forgetful Detective series, "The License Plate of Kyoko Okitegami". I can still remember "The Musical Score", but what about "The Bulletin Board"...?

Mr. VOFAN illustrated Ms. Kyoko for this book, keeping the style of the previous covers but with a unique twist. Thank you very much. The book design is also very stylish, and I hope we live in a world where we can remember to say things are stylish. I plan to write up to the twenty-fourth installment in the series, but I wonder what kind of "today" we'll be facing by then?

Nisio Isin

*TL Notes: Let me address a few points:
a) In the line above, "bringing that character back", it should refer to Aritsugu Satoi, from volume 1. There are quite a few throwbacks to volume 1, including the "Writhing God" book, as the author implies above

b) "White Birch" is "shirakaba" in japanese, with Shirakaba and Araragi being famous magazines for poets. Maybe a blonde, all-white character is supposed to be a counterpoint for the quite-black Koyomi? Though I suppose they share the fact that they both are cops, have a tsundere wife, and have been accused by a friend of being a child molester (not like Koyomi can actually beat the allegations, lol)
c) Back in chapter 5, the order in which Yakusuke lists the volumes is quite peculiar. Borrowing from Kyoko's exhaustive deduction again, I can think of 3 reasons: 1) It might be just because of an in-story excuse like "the order he happens to remember them". 2) Considering that he's the self-proclaimed biggest fan of hers, this could be the actual chronological order of the volumes, leaving aside volume 1 like he says himself. After all, except for the order of introduction of certain characters (Kakoi and Hidarui), like 2 < 6 < 9 < 10 (or 11 before Musical Score and Bulletin Board), I don't think there's any other event that would necessitate one volume happening before another. 3) Being the least charitable possible, one could think they're disordered like this so readers don't notice volume 7 is missing, which might have been too "meta" for the situation at hand
d) While on the books list again, maybe you noticed I listed volume 3 as “Challenge Letter” and not just “Challenge” as the original translator put it. No offense at all, but “Challenge Letter” is the proper translation, following the motif of all the titles being “something you can read”
e) "What she knows, she just knows" (知っていることを、知っているだけ) in chapter 3 is kind of similar to part of Hanekawa’s iconic line "I don't know everything, I just know what I know" (なんでもは知らないわよ。知ってることだけ)
f) The volume's title should by all means be "The Dog Tag of Kyoko Okitegami", but as seen in the story a couple times, it's changed on purpose into kind of a made-up term to avoid saying that outright